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The Emergence of Feminism During the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries by Female Artists and Authors

Tracy S. Koubek
Rollins College, tracykoubek@gmail.com

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by

Tracy S. Koubek

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Mentor: Dr. Ed Cohen
Reader: Dr. Susan H. Libby

Rollins College
Hamilton Holt School
Master of Liberal Studies Program
Winter Park, Florida

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Director, Master of Liberal Studies Program

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Dean, Hamilton Holt School
Rollins College

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Introduction

Women's Limitations and Challenges in a Patriarchal Society

Female artists and authors prior to the twenty-first century deserve more appreciation for their contributions to the world then they receive. They hurdled obstacles to pursue their passions and many reached renowned fame and adulation from the public during their lifetime; however, historical and feminist scholarship and survey courses have only just begun to include these talented women in their studies in the last few decades. This essay on Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842), Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) will illustrate the ways in which four women negotiated their ambitions and careers in the face of the cultural restrictions placed upon them during their lives. Although these women lived during different time periods, they all faced challenges in a patriarchal society such as: claims against their womanhood as dissenters, the common belief that females lacked creative minds, and insufficient educational resources. This essay begins with a focus on the negative effects that a separation between the private and public spheres had on women, how these changes came about, the expectations society imposed on women, and how many women learned to cope and step forward into the public sphere. The emphasis shifts to an examination of the lives of Vigée-Lebrun, Cassatt, Brontë, and Barrett Browning and the career paths they pursued as women living in a patriarchal society. By providing a detailed analysis of their works, this essay reveals how each woman maintained her idealized feminine image while she pursued a profession outside of the domestic realm. All four women conveyed compelling visionary images of a new woman to their public audience and challenged the patriarchal theory that women could not and

should not engage in artistic talents. Ultimately, this essay argues that Vigée-Lebrun, Cassatt, Brontë, and Barrett Browning's works, whether visual or literary, increased awareness and pressed for a new focus of women's worth, function, and responsibility in Victorian society.

To realize the greatness of the accomplishments of these four gifted females, one must understand the challenges women faced during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The late eighteenth century, the period of Vigée-Lebrun, was a time of dramatic change both in the political arena and the social structure in France. The proletariat became angry that they bore the burden of taxes while the nobility owned the land, exempt from taxes. The nobility enjoyed leisure and luxury while the commoners slaved away to sustain their families. The common man began to demand more equality for his hard labor. A cultural decline began. Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette spent their wealth on pleasure and fashion rather than the people of their country. The call of America, "liberty, equality…taxation without representation is tyranny" became the cry of France's poverty stricken citizens.[1] A revolution was in the works.

Not only did the political realm dramatically shift from the ousting of a monarchy to a newly-formed Republic, but also the formation of a new class, the bourgeoisie, led to a change in women's position and roles within the family. Women were denied property rights as well as personal rights afforded to men.[2] The *ancien-régime* theory of family succession, which resulted in many unhappy arranged marriages for status and lineage, was replaced by a focus on the importance of childhood, a bourgeois ideology. Mothers

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[1] Winthrop and Frances Nielson, "Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun," in *Seven Women: Great Painters* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1969), 35.
[2] Whitney Chadwick, "A New Ideology of Femininity in France and England," in *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 168.

became the caregivers and family life became important, even among members of the court. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued in *Emile* that a woman's purpose lies in satisfying the wishes of men, and a woman's education should instill these components into her very way of thinking.[3] He contends that a woman's "natural" place belongs in the home, subjected to the wills of men, and that reason, or education, will damage that which makes women desirable.[4] He refutes the thought of women in salons discoursing in intellectual conversation. He believes that corruption of women would abound in the salons and lead to illegitimate children. Aristocratic women who pursue their own pleasures rather than care for their children at home disregarded their "natural" station in life, according to Rousseau. By keeping women in the domestic sphere, men could control them and maintain happiness in the home. Children's education should come from their experiences in nature and from their mother.[5] Women's purpose in life consisted of motherhood, argued Rousseau, not professions outside of the domestic sphere.[6]

Many of the ideas set forth by Rousseau in France during the late eighteenth century spread to England and America; however, during the nineteenth century, industrialization brought about new changes in England, America, and France that especially affected the socio-economic status of the middle class. Women gained more rights and protections. In 1857, England established the Association for the Promotion of the Employment of Women to promote higher salaries and better working conditions for

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[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *His Educated Theories Selected from Émile, Julie, and Other Writings,* translated by R. L. Archer (New York: Baron's Educational Series, 1964), 221.
[4] Ibid., 253.
[5] Rousseau's *Émile* implies this concept throughout the first chapter titled "Infancy."
[6] Ibid. Book Five enforces this idea of the importance of motherhood and child bearing.

women in London.[7] An education movement in the nineteenth century in America, England, and France led to more and better opportunities for women to apply their intellectual capabilities.[8] Those in favor of women's educational reform claimed that professions and education outside of domestic duties would result in women marrying for love rather than necessity, and the choice to remain unmarried would gain popularity, decreasing prostitution, which might lead men to desire marriage instead of lusting after women to fulfill selfish needs.[9] In 1872, Lady Amberley, an advocate for women's educational reform and suffrage, wrote in a letter addressed to her daughter Kate: "I have not had time to read the article on female education in the *Times*—I hear young men are much afraid women shall know too much and spoil the race by overworking their brains—poor dears, they will ever find fools to match them."[10] The future looked optimistic for women in the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately, many of these changes did not occur until after the deaths of Vigée-Lebrun, Barrett Browning, and Brontë.

As industrialization improved the market, men left home to seek work and earn livings, which required women to remain home in charge of household duties. A separation occurred between men and women. As men spent more time in the public sphere earning wages for their labor, women remained at home in the private sphere unpaid for their diligent work. During the Victorian period, "productive" work, or work

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[7] Patricia Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal: 1837-1873* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 66-67.
[8] Thomson, 39, and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, introduction to Part I in *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States*, eds. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 16-17.
[9] Thomson, 115.
[10] *The Amberley Papers: The Letters and Diaries of Bertrand Russel's Parents*, Vol. II, ed. Bertrand and Patricia Russell, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1937), 494.

created for the production of goods for sale and produced in a shop or factory, provided the only means of earning income. [11] The laborious tasks performed by women at home went unrecognized as "productive" since they did not produce goods to sell, and therefore did not receive earnings. As a result, this "unproductive" work led to the denigrated role of women in the private sphere and excluded them from the labor force.

Women's duties in the private sphere included the responsibility for managing the home front: feeding the family, managing finances and servants, cleaning the home, mending clothing and linens, and washing. A woman kept herself very busy in the years before vacuum cleaners, washers and dryers, electricity, and gas. Women performed all tasks by hand, and few middle-class women had more than one servant.[12] According to *The Lady's Rustic Household*, written by Cora-Elisabeth Millet-Robinson and published in 1844-45:

> The mistress of a house has many duties to fulfill. The order and perfection she brings to their accomplishment contributes greatly to the family's prosperity…Boredom will never overcome her because boredom is born from idleness…when boredom has successfully been banished from one's existence, happiness is quite ready to take its place…[13]

Advice manuals that incorporated patriarchal notions, such as this one, served as persuasive countermeasures for women to take pride in their roles as mothers and wives, even though they received little if any recognition. The emphasis placed on tasks performed in the domestic sphere suggested domesticity as the proper form of labor for women, while many considered professions outside of the private sphere inappropriate. The domestic sphere became a constricted place for women, which required hard work

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[11] Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen, introduction to Part III, in *Victorian Women,* 274.
[12] Ibid., 279.
[13] An excerpt from Cora-Elisabeth Millet-Robinson's *The Lady's Rustic Household*, in *Victorian Women*, 294.

and left little time for leisure. Rousseau's philosophy had not disappeared with the rise of industrialism.

Much of the literature of the nineteenth century glorified the work performed by women in their homes, and females wrote many of these texts.[14] Society expected women to exemplify the "angel in the house" mentality. The term "Angel in the House" originated from a poem written in the 1850s by Patmore Coventry but the concept existed before the publication of this poem. Coventry composed this poem about his wife whom he cherished and believed exemplified the ideal woman. The details he used in his poetry to depict the image of perfection in the eyes of a man held true during the entire Victorian period.[15] The patriarchal function of the idealized woman during the Victorian period separated the middle class from the dissolute aristocracy and the working class who lacked good manners. The middle classes demonstrated their cultural dominance with their "angel in the house" idealization of women and separate spheres, which set themselves apart from the rest of society. This mentality would, however, create unease when women began fighting for their place in the public sphere in the near future, as Aurora Leigh did in Barrett Browning's verse novel.

This idealized image of women as angels won the hearts of readers, but ultimately added to the constraints of women in society. The few professions available to unmarried women, such as governess, teacher, or companion to a wealthy woman, left them in positions of servant-like status. On the other hand, women who chose marriage also lived like servants. Not only must married women represent "angels in the house" to satisfy their husbands, but they also managed the household and the children. They lost their

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[14] Hume and Offen, introduction to Part III, 273.
[15] Coventry's poem, dated 1854-56, reprinted in *Victorian Women*, 134-140.

independence, identity, and self-worth. If a woman chose marriage and later found her situation unhappy, she became trapped and locked down in submission to her husband for financial dependence. Wives lost not only their legal rights, but also their property and earned income, if any, to their husbands. Women could not seek divorce legally until Parliament established the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1857, and even then a woman could not divorce her husband unless she could prove his adultery, which might possibly lead to desertion, criminal acts, or incest, causing injury to the wife.[16] Women entered into marriage for partnerships; however, for some unfortunate wives, Estelle Freedman and Erna Olafson Hellerstein contend, "the relative powerlessness of women in marriage left them vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, as contemporary accounts of domestic violence, incest, and adultery illustrate."[17] Life was bleak for women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[16] Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine,* 88.
[17] Freedman and Hellerstein, introduction to Part II, in *Victorian Women*, 123.

Chapter One

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: A Female Genius

In many ways, Vigée-Lebrun personified an anomaly within the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She contradicted the traditional beliefs that regarded women during her lifetime as a woman artist capable of supporting herself through her own art. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock write: "A woman artist was acceptable in the eighteenth century but by very different criteria than those applied to men. She was accepted only in so far as her person, her public persona conformed to the current notion of woman, not artist."[18] By recounting the life of Vigée-Lebrun, the reader can begin to understand the limits imposed on a woman during the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, especially one attempting to live a life outside of the private sphere. Also, by viewing her works of art and studying her memoirs, one can begin to appreciate how Vigée-Lebrun succeeded in a career thought of as a male profession.[19]

Vigée-Lebrun, a bourgeois woman living in Paris, chased after her dreams as an artist and managed to balance a family life with a professional life. This chapter will demonstrate how Vigée-Lebrun maintained her feminine image in the public arena while pursuing her artistic career. Before the nineteenth century, women artists generally learned to paint from their fathers or their husbands.[20] Omission from the study of life models and instruction at the Académie Royale in Paris forced women to focus their skills on portraiture and still life, mainly to paint women and children. Many women

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[18] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 96.
[19] Vigée-Lebrun wrote her memoirs as requested by a friend, which she informs the reader on the first page in *Souvenirs de Mme. Vigée-Lebrun* (New York: R. Worthington, 1879), 1.
[20] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988), 168.

during the eighteenth century learned to paint at an early age from art instructors at other French academies, which proved their talents without the aid of instruction from within the Académie Royale, and established their professions before their twenties. Vigée-Lebrun's artistic career enabled her to provide for her family at the age of fifteen.[21] Popularity in the elite social circles stemmed from excelled social skills, and for Vigée-Lebrun, her charm and beauty greatly enhanced her fame among the aristocracy and the French court. One must remember that the exclusion of women from the methods of training received by men hindered their skills, and had they received the same training as men in the study of anatomy and nude drawing, many of these women might have surpassed the male artists of their period.

Female artists still experienced limitations in the nineteenth century that governed feminine conduct. The public viewed those who pursued careers outside of the domestic sphere as a threat to the sanctity of their womanhood for it violated a women's "natural" role in the home as guardian of her family.[22] Not only did it threaten a woman's reputation, but it also threatened men since women artists presented competition. Men sought out ways to "protect" women from professional careers by keeping them in their place, safe at home with their family. Maintaining a serious career as an artist presented a major challenge for women since marriage and domestic duties signaled the end of the road for many female artists; so it seems rightfully so that those who did pursue their passions and talents deserve acknowledgment for their accomplishments.

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[21] Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977), 41.
[22] Nochlin, "No Great Women Artists," 152.

Vigée-Lebrun entered the world on April 16, 1755, the daughter of Louis Vigée, a pastel portrait painter and a guild member at the Académie Saint-Luc de Paris.[23] Vigée-Lebrun attended a convent where her passion for art became obvious from her scribbling in schoolbooks, on walls, and in the sand at the playground. Her father exclaimed: "Thou wilt be a painter, my child, if ever there was one."[24] Her father, her first master, provided her with instruction in art and painting. In 1774, after the death of her father, Vigée-Lebrun exhibited her works for the first time at the same studio where her father taught, the Académie Saint-Luc, where she received admittance without the help of an instructor.[25] Mainly self-taught, her early success resulted from ambition, determination, and hard work. She painted portraits of family members and copied works of masters displayed in salons, studios, and private collections of friends and family. Vigée-Lebrun had beauty and charm, which greatly benefited her social interdependence. At age twenty, Vigée-Lebrun met Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, a prosperous art dealer, who proposed marriage to her. She hesitated to accept: "I was not at all anxious to marry him…I had no anxieties about my future, as I earned a good deal of money, so that I did not feel any desire to be married." She exhibited a very noncompliant outlook for women of the period.[26] She finally did accept Lebrun's proposal on her mother's behalf, and her marriage in 1776 opened new avenues for her to meet painters and view paintings that she could study and learn from, while the marriage also elevated her status to upper class.[27] Her social class provided her more mobility among the different classes and the aristocracy welcomed her. This new status greatly influenced her work and her social

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[23] Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 285.
[24] Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*,1-2.
[25] Ibid., 9.
[26] Ibid., 30-31.
[27] Nielson, "Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun," 34.

connections in Paris, which gained her more respect, acclaim, and clientele. Vigée-Lebrun began to paint for Queen Marie-Antoinette and completed her first portrait in 1779.[28] She transacted business between courtly patrons and bourgeois clientele. She painted tasteful portraits to flatter the elite by exhibiting their beauty: slender figures, soft and smooth skin, delicate and refined complexions, magnificently dressed, elaborate hairstyles, and healthy appearance and glow of skin. She also painted domestic scenes of mother and child[ren] to appease the novel ideology of the Enlightenment that a woman's "natural" place belonged in the home as "mother."[29] She maintained in her work and personal life her self-image as a woman of charm, elegance, and unpretentiousness, which afforded her prominence among many critics and the public. She resisted the traditional role of women, and instead worked hard to support herself and her family, which resulted in a marriage that greatly benefited her career as an artist. She demonstrated her pride in the name she made for herself by keeping her maiden name in addition to her husband's last name.

Vigée-Lebrun gave birth to her only child Jeanne-Julie-Louise in 1780.[30] She wrote in her memoirs: "I beheld in my daughter the joy of my life and the comfort of my old age, so that it was not surprising that she had her own way in most things."[31] She rejoiced over her love for her daughter and the idea of motherhood; yet, she also remarked that she would not allow motherhood to interrupt her profession: "The day my daughter was born I never quitted my studio, and worked at my *Venus tying the wings of*

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[28]Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 40.
[29] For more on the Enlightenment ideology of motherhood in art read Carol Duncan's "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in Eighteenth-Century French Art," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Mary D. Garrard and Norma Broude, 201-219 (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982).
[30] Vigée-Lebrun had a second pregnancy, but this daughter died in infancy, according to this edition of *Souvenirs*.
[31] Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 287.

Love, in the intervals when I felt no pain."[32] Vigée-Lebrun challenged herself in both motherhood and her career when she produced a history painting, considered the most difficult and highly regarded of genres, during her pregnancy.[33] She had such a passion for her art that she did not want to abandon her project, even for contractions or birth. Debates abounded during the eighteenth century about the effects of the uterus on a woman's mental and biological inferiority and motherhood as the cure for the "runaway mind," but Vigée-Lebrun ignored these theories and continued with her work during her entire pregnancy.[34] She noted in *Souvenirs*: "The joy I felt when, after two years of marriage, I hoped to become a mother…my extreme love for my art rendered me careless as to the small details of life, for happy as I felt, I let the time pass by without preparing anything for myself."[35] She got so caught up in her painting that she ignored the pains of labor; however, she also rhapsodized about her pregnancy as a great happiness in her life, which enabled her to maintain her feminine station as a mother in her memoirs. She juxtaposed her accomplishment in both her profession and motherhood. She called to mind an appointment to meet with a client on the day she went into labor: "No! No!, said I. I have a sitting tomorrow; I will not be ill today…at ten o'clock my daughter was born."[36] She was committed to her career and did not wish to confine herself to the role of motherhood. She wished to partake and achieve in both and she wanted the world to see this in both her art and memoirs.

In the seventeenth century, women were not typically depicted as motherly—

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[32] Ibid., 35.
[33] The painting she worked on during her pregnancy is *Venus Tying Cupid's Wings*, 1779, mentioned in *Souvenirs*, 35. Ironically, she painted this work, which depicts a mother and child, since Venus was the supposed mother of Cupid, while she was expecting to become a mother.
[34] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 28.
[35] Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 35.
[36] Ibid., 36.

holding their children or interacting with them—unless the painting depicted Madonna and Child images. Instead, painters presented women as obedient wives, seated beside their husbands, usually with their children placed in close proximity but without physical interaction, such as in the French painter Louis Le Nain's *Peasant Interior* (fig. 1), 1642. In this representation of a peasant family, the mother sits in-between her husband and son while the daughter stands alone in the back of the room, unnoticed by her parents and sibling. It appears the husband has just returned home, as he still holds his hat and wears a heavy coat. The wife has fixed this meal for her husband, suggested by the placement of the spoon closest to him. The son, who stares intently at his father, holds a glass of wine and a pitcher probably meant for his father to receive. This image does not present the viewer with a sense of familial warmth, but rather a focus on survival implied by the little bit of scraps on the plate placed in front of the three central figures. In art during the eighteenth century, the image of woman as the good wife shifted to the image of a happy and beloved mother.[37] Artists began to represent this new glorification of motherhood in their art. Women were responsible for helping in the continuation of the family lineage. For many, their sole purpose was to insure that the estates and monies remained in the family through childbirth and rearing. Man symbolized authority and it fell into a woman's duty to honor and comply with his wishes. Women performed domestic duties in the home while their husbands worked to provide food and shelter for their families. Men expected women to understand and take pride in their role in the household as mothers and wives.

The role of motherhood and images of happy mothers represent popular motifs in

[37] This shift is the subject of Duncan's "Happy Mothers."

art for many women artists during the eighteenth century. Motherhood became a central theme in Vigée -Lebrun's oeuvre, especially in portraits of herself with her daughter. Although her career demanded much of her time, Vigée-Lebrun found inspiration and joy when she spent time with Julie. Many of Vigée-Lebrun's self-portraits show Julie wrapped in her arms in a protective and loving embrace. Vigée-Lebrun depicted herself the way she wanted the public to see her, in both her art and her writings, as a woman who fulfills the maternal ideal.

Not only did Vigée-Lebrun wish to display her joys of motherhood in her paintings, but she also wanted to demonstrate that she could imitate the Renaissance master Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* (fig. 2), ca. 1514, and give it her own personal style. She replaces the Madonna and Child with herself and her daughter in *Portrait of the Artist with Her Daughter* (called *Maternal Tenderness*) (fig. 3), 1786. Just as Raphael painted his vision of idealized beauty in his Virgin figure, Vigée-Lebrun paints herself as both model and painter of idealized beauty by painting her own beautiful portrait in a similar embrace with her daughter. She borrows the pose of the Madonna and Child in this self-portrait and imitates the gesture of tender embraces. She also illustrates her love for her daughter in her *Venus Tying Cupid's Wings* (fig 4), as the arms of Venus wrap around to tie the wings of Cupid. Vigée-Lebrun eliminates the male figure in *Maternal Tenderness* and portrays herself in a turbaned head and shawl, a favorite style of hers that appears in many of her portraits.[38] In a sense, she becomes a secularized Virgin. Her daughter wears a white dress, which implies the youth's innocence, and also exhibits a very different

[38] Paula Rea Radisich claims that Vigée-Lebrun's style of dress and images on canvas set a fashion for others to follow in "Que peut définer les femmes?: Vigée-Lebrun's Portraits of an Artist," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Special Issue: Art History: New Voices/New Visions (Summer, 1992), 455.

color scheme than Raphael's painting. Rather than the oval frame selected by Raphael for his work, Vigée-Lebrun paints on a rectangular canvas with a rectangular frame but uses a series of circles in her headpiece and the face of her daughter juxtaposed with a pyramid formed by her headpiece and her arms and body. Another interesting reference to Raphael's style appears in the placement and pose of Vigée-Lebrun's right arm, which resembles the position and arrangement of the hand and fingers of Raphael's mistress in *La Fornarina*. Vigée-Lebrun's loving embrace around her daughter signifies the "new concept of the family that challenged long-established attitudes and customs" prior to the late eighteenth century after the writings of Rousseau in 1761, while Raphael's stylistic influence illustrates her talent and appreciation for the masters.[39]

Vigée-Lebrun would incorporate this theme of motherhood into other self-portraits with her daughter, as well as in many other portraits of noble patrons. *The Marquise de Pezay and the Marquise de Rouget with Her Two Children* (fig. 5), 1787, depicts an affectionate noble patron family seated with a friend. The Marquise de Rouget embraces her loved ones and expresses filial affection, while her two children embrace her in return, which shows the love they feel for their mother. The Marquise de Pezay points her right hand towards the youngest child who rests his head in the mother's lap. The Marquise's hand, which directs the viewer's focus back onto the children, signals that this painting pays tribute to motherhood. The two female friends also convey their adoration for each other with the touch of their hands, which suggests this painting pays tribute to friendship as well as maternal love.

Vigée-Lebrun depicted herself and Marie-Antoinette in "natural" settings, which

[39] Duncan, "Happy Mothers," 204 and 208.

exploited the Enlightenment ideals of motherhood. She illustrates this "natural" setting in her self-portraits with her daughter and in royal family portraits such as *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette with Her Children* (fig. 6), 1787. Whitney Chadwick considers *Marie-Antoinette with Children* as one of the "great works of eighteenth-century political painting."[40] Marie-Antoinette commissioned this painting to restore her failing reputation in France after the Diamond Necklace Affair, a scandal that incriminated the queen in a love affair, and led to questions about her promiscuity and squandering of money.[41] Vigée-Lebrun again borrows from Holy Family depictions during the High Renaissance with the triangular positioning of the family. A light appears to shine down from the upper left corner of the composition down onto the figures of the family, which gives them an almost divine glow, and leaves everything else in shadow. This same light also touches down into the cradle and brings attention to the empty bed. The eldest daughter leans against her mother as she rubs her cheek against her mother's shoulder and embraces her arm. The youngest child squirms in the queen's lap, safely clasped in her arms. The dauphin stands apart from the rest of the family, perhaps to emphasize his right as heir to the throne. An empty cradle, draped in black for mourning, pays respect to the queen's deceased daughter Princess Sophie, who died in infancy.[42] The dauphin lifts the blanket up from the cradle while he points his other hand towards his mother, which draws the viewer's gaze from one to the other, perhaps to indicate the queen as the cradle of France from whom the heir has been born. The large jewelry box tucked away behind the cradle suggests that the queen's wealth existed in her family rather than her

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[40] Chadwick, "A New Ideology of Femininity," 168.
[41] Radisich, "Que peut définer les femmes?: Vigée-Lebrun's Portraits of an Artist," 449.
[42] Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 41.

possessions. Marie-Antoinette sits in the center, which implies her power and role in the family, but the smiling and adoring children who surround her represent the newfound notions and morals of the bourgeois ideals of the loving family. Again, Vigée-Lebrun's public display of her sensitivity to the joys and sorrows of motherhood appears in this royal depiction of Marie-Antoinette and her family. This portrait also testifies to Vigée-Lebrun's power as the queen's portraitist who propagates images and political messages of the monarchy for the public eye.

Vigée-Lebrun painted another portrayal of Marie-Antoinette that caused a stir and sent forth an unintended political message. This controversial painting, *Marie-Antoinette en chemise* (fig. 7), 1783, depicts the queen dressed in a simple white muslin gown with a straw hat that gives her a peasant-like appearance. Women did not wear this expensive dress in public because of its simplicity and lack of decorum.[43] When worn outside the home, it was intended for strolls, fêtes, and games with female companions.[44] The commoners already disliked the queen for her squandering of the county's resources, but to depict her as a commoner also met with public disapproval. According to Sheriff, this portrait resulted in enemies as the public and critics judged against the subject matter's negative moral effect and how it might interpret the future.[45] It appears the queen ignored the French court mandates of conduct and etiquette, and her depiction in *en chemise* reminds the public that she desired a private life in addition to her role as monarch. Perhaps this gave the impression she lacked a concern for her country, which presented a threat to France and its people. The question to ask is whether Marie-Antoinette

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[43]Heidi A. Strobel, "Royal 'Matronage' of Women Artists in the Late-Eighteenth Century," *Woman's Art Journal,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Autumn, 2005 - Winter, 2006), 6.
[44] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 143-45.
[45] Ibid.,170.

requested Vigée-Lebrun to depict her in this costume, or if Vigée-Lebrun had the freedom to do as she liked with the painting? Sheriff argues, "Vigée-Lebrun has imaged, perhaps without realizing it, Marie-Antoinette's desire to not be queen of France," but she gives the queen the opportunity to become an individual on canvas engaged in a private moment by depicting her in the costume reserved for leisurely pursuits out of the public eye. [46] Her artistic expression of women's naturalness enhanced her reputation among the elite, and especially with the queen of France, if not the public.

The Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture accepted Vigée-Lebrun in 1783, the same year Vigée-Lebrun painted her political portrait of Marie-Antoinette. The Académie provided an elite group of artists the opportunity to view and copy drawings from the Old masters and permitted men to study life models. Vigée-Lebrun made the final count of women in the Académie four, the limit decreed by the Académie itself.[47] Only fifteen women had been elected members by 1783.[48] Sheriff argues that the Académie limited women's acceptance for fear that women might efface masculinity: "women would impede art's progress by taking academic positions that might otherwise be filled by (male) history painters, who *would* be useful to the progress of the arts."[49] Men imposed limits on women in the Académie to maintain the masculine hegemony in the art world, and perhaps in fear that they risked the loss of a profitable monopoly. Vigée-Lebrun would eventually prove her usefulness to the arts in her paintings by the reputation that preceded her, even though she never gained the status as a history painter.

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[46] Ibid.,167.
[47] Ibid.,79.
[48] Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 53.
[49] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*,113.

The exclusion of women from the study of life drawing during the eighteenth century hindered them from creating history paintings, considered a "masculine" style and the highest of the various genres.[50] The study of life models, or an understanding of the nude figure, aided the artist to portray the courtly patrons and family as heroic figures, gods, or goddesses. Most women during this period painted still life, portraiture, and landscape. The Académie had less respect for these "feminine" genres because they did not require expertise or intelligence from the artist. Late eighteenth-century opinion beheld women as unintelligent, subject to flights of fancy, and inferior to men.[51] Claims that intellectual work could damage the health and reproductive organs of women led to the opinion that intellectual paintings presented a danger to women.[52] Women who refused to engage in masculine paintings could preserve their "feminine" modesty.[53]

Upon Vigée-Lebrun's admittance into the Académie Royale, she did not receive a rank or genre position, nor did she present a *morceau de reception* (a masterpiece selected by the officials), both customary for candidates seeking acceptance into the Académie.[54] Men who wished to gain admittance into the Académie went through a training program and presented a reception piece based on a topic assigned to them by the Académie and submitted for evaluation.[55] Women did not follow these procedures. They gained admittance on the same day that they presented their reception piece if the voice vote of the assembly agreed to let them in. Vigée-Lebrun entered not through the

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[50] Pollock, "Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for Feminist Art Historians," *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1983), 45.
[51] Sheriff, "So What Are You Working On: Categorizing *The Exceptional Woman*," in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, eds. Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 48.
[52] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 26.
[53] Ibid.,116.
[54] Ibid.,74.
[55] Ibid.,80.

bureaucratic system enforced by the Academy, but as requested by the queen and ordered by the king as an exception to the laws. Her role as a wife to an art dealer presented a problem to the Académie since "in France a wife has no other *état* than that of her husband."[56] Although she had her profession and means of income, she remained attached to her husband's business. Her womanhood caused conflict with her profession in the cultural framework of the period. Fortunately, Vigée-Lebrun became member in the Académie and superseded the limits imposed by society, thanks to her affiliation as the queen's private artist, a significant and public position with respect to the monarchy. At the Académie she gained prestige as an *agréé*, or apprentice Academician, although she still could not attend nude drawing classes to aid in history paintings.[57] Her reputation flourished from her participation in the Salon of 1783.

Vigée-Lebrun challenged the theory that women could not create history paintings by entering hers, selected by herself rather than the Académie, to the Salon of 1783. She chose *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (fig. 8), a work completed in 1780.[58] *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* does not portray men in heroic action as many male painters rendered in their history paintings.[59] Instead, her painting adheres to a feminine portrayal of allegorical women, Peace and Abundance. Vigée-Lebrun's history paintings do not depict male figures and very few men appear in her collection of portraits.[60] Vigée-Lebrun draws on a semiotic coding in *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* that enables the viewer to understand the interpretation of certain symbols and signs within the work to

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[56] Ibid.,91.
[57] Ibid., 80.
[58] During the years of her first visit to Marie-Antoinette, 1779-1780, Vigée-Lebrun worked on several history paintings: *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (1780); *Venus Tying Cupid's Wings* (1779), *Juno Borrowing the Belt of Venus* (1780, now lost); *Innocence Taking Refuge in the Arms of Justice* (1779).
[59] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman,* 106.
[60] Ibid.,120.

enhance the allegorical painting. The representation of Peace guiding Abundance indicates a masculine role, while the guided figure signifies a feminine role, submissive and dependent. Vigée-Lebrun presents the symbols of both peace and abundance within the composition: Peace holds an olive branch between her forefinger and thumb and a crown of laurel rests on her head while Abundance clutches an overflowing cornucopia and wears a crown of flowers. The fruits that emerge from the cornucopia and the bare-breasted figure symbolize the fecundity of Nature. Interestingly, Peace guides Abundance, which suggests that abundance cannot thrive without harmony among people. This work of art created by Vigée-Lebrun, a female artist, succeeds as a history painting because it communicates a subject and provides the viewer with the satisfaction of intellectual reflection.[61] Sheriff contends that *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* "perhaps anticipates the end of the French expenditures for the American Revolution, which would bring back abundance to the arts."[62]Vigée-Lebrun not only created a history painting, which perhaps refers to a contemporary political event according to Sheriff, but she created it during her pregnancy. She disproved the common belief that women lacked creative minds, intellect, and that procreation served as their only function in life.

Vigée-Lebrun frequently chose to paint self-portraits. Self-representation made it possible for a woman to establish herself as an artist and as a woman on canvas, and provided a way for women to seek "out of restrictive definitions," which allowed her to challenge the boundaries imposed on her in a patriarchal society. [63] *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* (fig. 9), 1783, represents Vigée-Lebrun in the conventional guise of womanhood, a beautiful woman dressed in fashionable attire. She preferred to paint

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[61] Ibid.,111.
[62] Ibid.,127.
[63] Sheriff, "So What Are You Working On," 52.

women dressed in simple gowns without jewelry that presented the body more naturally, and she does so in this portrait.[64] She wears a straw hat decorated with a feather and a garland of flowers. She stares back at the viewer, her lips barely parted as if to speak. She holds in her left arm the tools of her trade, a palette topped with oils and paintbrushes in her hand. Her right arm reaches out in front of her towards the viewer, as if to invite the viewer into the canvas to join her. Her hair appears slightly disheveled, perhaps from a breeze since she stands outside with a cloud-flecked sky behind her. The black shawl contrasts the whiteness of her chest and lower portion of her face, which gives her a glowing effect, possibly from sunlight. She does not leave out the inevitable shadow that appears on the upper portion of her face from the hat shielding the light. Sheriff contends that Vigée-Lebrun's extended right hand suggests a "rhetorical gesture" common in other paintings that depicted intelligent men.[65] Her lips slightly parted could imply that she engages in "rational discourse," a contradictory attribute for women since popular belief claimed they did not have intellectual capabilities.[66]

Vigée-Lebrun again referred to a painting by a master in one of her self-portraits. *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* borrows from the painting *Portrait of Susanna Lunden (?)* (fig. 10), (called *Le Châpeau de Paille*), 1620-25, by the master Peter-Paul Rubens. In this portrayal of a beautiful and fashionable woman of the seventeenth century, Rubens depicts Susanna Lunden with bountiful breasts and an oversized hat with feathers. She crosses her arms and a ring rests on her forefinger, which suggests wealth. She averts her eyes "perhaps showing false modesty at work in exciting the viewer's desire…The viewer has free license to explore Ruben's image, for with eyes averted the woman

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[64] Nielson, "Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun," 32.
[65] Ibid.,206.
[66] Ibid. Sheriff states that critics have called Vigée-Lebrun a genius based on this painting, 200.

cannot be imagined as confronting, challenging, or even acknowledging any viewer's gaze."[67] The figure also looms in the foreground, which practically allows contact between the viewer and the figure. In contrast, Vigée-Lebrun's figure remains back a ways from the viewer, and her breasts remain hidden beneath the drapery of her dress, which exemplifies her modesty and reduces the invitation of the voyeuristic gaze. Her pose differs slightly from Susanna's but they resemble each other in subject matter. Both become subjects of Rubens—one a wife, the other an admirer. Again Vigée-Lebrun has imitated a masculine master painter, but she has included her own personal style and presented herself not only as a "passive object of the painter's gaze, but also as an active creator of a work of art."[68] She is both woman and artist, and genius in the genre of portraiture.

As her works clearly illustrate, Vigée-Lebrun depicted her sitters in an idealized fashion, altruistic in appearance as they embrace loved ones. She took care not to reveal defects, and instead presented her clients in flattering poses and expressions. She painted people in likeness, but in her own artistic expression. She ignored the grandiose styles and manners of her time and painted with freshness and naturalness. She depicted nobility as simple people not lost in the fashion and luxury of the period. She did not create a new style of art, but she did refrain from over-sentimentality in her art. Her femininity appears in her works as mother, daughter, and wife; yet she maintained her career as a professional artist. She did not try to enter into a man's world by depicting women the way men saw them. She remained in her own realm and depicted what she

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[67] Ibid., 209.

[68] Catherine R. Montfort, "Self Portraits, Portraits of Self: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Women Artists of the Eighteenth Century," *Pacific Coast Philology,* Vol. 40, No. 1 (2005), 11.

understood as a woman. Due to these elements and the style of her paintings, the nobility continued to seek after her to paint their portraits. Following the Revolution in 1789, Vigée-Lebrun and her daughter fled Paris in fear for their lives after the arrest of the king and queen, her noble friends and patrons.[69] She went into exile with her daughter for twelve years and moved to Italy where she received a fervent reception there, as well as in Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, England, and Russia where she painted portraits for many distinguished patrons and royalty.[70] Vigée-Lebrun accepted a commission to paint a portrait of Catherine the Great, and upon its completion she gained acceptance into the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg in 1795.[71] She finally returned to Paris in 1802, where she wrote and published her *Souvenirs* between 1835-1837. Vigée-Lebrun died in Paris in 1842.

In not only her art, but also in her autobiography written near the end of her life, the image of a strong and ambitious woman becomes visible.[72] Vigée-Lebrun's memoirs help to demonstrate her ability to maintain a public perception of femininity while she pursued a career outside the domestic sphere. As she looked back upon her life and recorded it in her memoirs, she provided the reader with a sense of cultural femininity in her maternal role, but she never hesitated to inform the reader the obstacles she persevered to fulfill her goal as a professional artist. She demanded of both the viewer and the reader to notice her artistic talent and her ability to balance it with motherhood. She recalled many of her triumphs in the art world, such as her acceptance as a woman into the Académie Royale, and she also named many of the notable courtly patrons she

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[69] Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 108.
[70] She recounts all the countries she visited and many of the portraits she created in her *Souvenirs.*
[71] Ibid., 286.
[72] Everything about Vigée-Lebrun in this essay comes from the 1879 edition of her *Souvenirs.*

painted for throughout Europe and in Russia. She boasted of the recognition she received on her travels and her position as head painter for Marie-Antoinette. She also revealed a softer side of her love for her family and her appreciation to her father for her success as an artist. Vigée-Lebrun possessed the qualities needed for both motherhood and career woman, and she proves it in both her art and her writings.

Her reputation and early success as a portraitist along with her beauty, social graces, and charm helped her transcend the limits imposed in a patriarchal society. Not only did she transcend the limits imposed upon her by the Académie, but she also transgressed the social standards of the "new" ideology established by the bourgeoisie that stated a woman's proper *état* belonged in the home as bearer and educator of children.[73] Vigée-Lebrun's career as a professional painter went against her "natural" *état* as defined by the culture of her time. She sought out her honor and reputation by pursuing a career in the public sphere at the Académie and in Salons rather than in the private sphere of her home. She refused to subject herself as only a wife and mother. Conventional theory claimed that a woman who entered the public sphere for fame and wealth violated her character of modesty and virtue.[74] Vigée-Lebrun invited public criticism into her life by pushing the envelope, so to speak, but she maintained the public perception of her femininity by depicting the "new" ideology in her art.

[73] Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 94.
[74] Ibid.,115.

Chapter Two

Mary Cassatt: A Modern Master of Women and Child

During the nineteenth century, American women began to see changes concerning their rights. The United States National Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 sparked the women's movement in America.[75] Women proceeded to reform social wrongs against themselves and other marginalized groups. They began to fight for abolitionism and suffrage. A specific set of gender roles grew in America as women moved outside of the home to work and support their families. Home became the place away from the business world of America, a place of spiritual values and morals—a safe haven.[76] Women who refrained from marriage and domesticity to pursue professional careers as artists established the first American women's group known as the "sisterhood."[77] These women believed that a woman must choose between marriage and a career since doing both would lead to neglect for one or the other. Women who chose spinsterhood made up fewer than ten percent of the women in America and about fifteen percent in England and France.[78] Spinsterhood enabled women independence to pursue careers for personal gain rather than to support a husband and children. It also meant they maintained the rights to their personal property and wages. Many of these women lived with family or friends.[79] Unmarried women, such as Mary Cassatt, maintained their feminine status in the public eye by painting pictures of mothers, children, and interior

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[75] Chadwick, "Moral Reform and American Art in the Nineteenth Century," in *Women, Art, and Society*, 211.
[76] Ibid., 205.
[77] Ibid., 217
[78] Estelle B. Freedman and Erna Olafson Hellerstein, "Introduction to Part II," in *Victorian Women,* eds. Hellerstein et al., 121.
[79] Ibid., 122.

spaces that represented domesticity. For these women, art became their family. Cassatt grew up in America during the women's movement. She came from a privileged family and was raised in a booming state that would later hold the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 where American women could display their works. The nineteenth century looked promising for Cassatt, an American female artist.

An unmarried woman who pursued a professional career as an artist and lived in America did not receive the same opposition as a woman in France during the nineteenth century. In Europe, a negative view still existed about women who left home in search of art professions. The prevailing belief that women would lose their chaste images and that working with models would stimulate the senses continued.[80] Maternal roles still defined womanhood, and all-female schools educated women with the tools necessary to become excellent mothers and wives.[81] Around the middle of the century, the Woman Question emerged: How could women contribute to society if separated from men and permitted only to remain in the home to raise children?[82] In America, many women lost their husbands and male family members during the Civil War (1861-1865), and in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) led to similar results. Women needed rights in the labor industry to survive and feed their families. Although France lagged behind in social progress, the rest of Europe and America moved forward due to educational and social reform movements. In the art world, however, women still lacked some of the educational resources that men benefited from, such as copying and studying live nude models. The École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, formerly the Académie Royale, enforced

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[80] Chadwick, "Moral Reform and American Art in the Nineteenth Century," in *Women, Art, and Society*, 176.
[81] Ibid., 178.
[82] Ibid., 176.

these limitations, which placed strictures on women's rights as artists. Nonconformist women who preferred to paint masculine genres, for example, animal paintings rather than domestic scenes or flowers, received criticism for "unsexing" themselves and society "labeled [them] as sexual deviants."[83] Women experienced a more difficult time as professional artists in France in the nineteenth century than in America.

On the other hand, Paris became more democratic and modernized during the Third Republic in 1875. Department stores opened, which drew women into the public streets, and resulted in advertising directed towards the female gazer rather than the male. Bonnie G. Smith argues that women were the mass-produced good consumers during the nineteenth century.[84] They led in the consumption of wares for the home, clothing, and jewelry, while the men directed the mass-production of such items. The public marketplace defined the modern world. Women began to venture into the public marketplace as consumers to purchase the wares imperative for them to fashion a refuge out of their home. "The home is seen as the repository for industrial goods," Smith writes, "and the taffeta-clad lady…fortifies the marketplace with her spendthrift habits."[85] For artists in Paris, especially Impressionists, women moving about in the public eye provided valuable models for representations of everyday life. Not only did women move about as consumers in the public marketplace, but also they sought entertainment and culture in local theatres. Cassatt took advantage of the modern world of consumer subjects who left the confinements of the home. She challenged the societal norms of women depicted in art by creating works that portrayed women as subjects engaged in

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[83] Ibid., 177.
[84] Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisies of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4.
[85] Ibid., 54.

activities for their own amusement, rather than as objects for the male gaze. She also created new modern portrayals of motherhood, which enabled her to maintain her feminine image, albeit as an unmarried female professional artist. She would succeed in Paris as an American painter.

Mary Stevenson Cassatt, considered one of the most significant American painters of the nineteenth century, was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania in 1844 to a wealthy elite family.[86] Her father worked as an investment broker and merchant, and prospered as an entrepreneurial capitalist, which enabled Mary to move about in upper-class circles. Cassatt's wealthy upbringing made possible travels abroad. She left Pennsylvania for Europe with her family in 1851. By the time she reached fifteen, she spoke French and German and experienced the Parisian way of life while she lived in Paris for two years.[87] The Cassatt family returned to America in 1855. She began to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1860. The Pennsylvania Academy permitted women to study live female nudes by 1868, a step closer than Vigée-Lebrun experienced as a painter, but Cassatt did not attend the Academy at this time.[88] During her education at the Pennsylvania Academy, women received instruction to master the human figure through the study of anatomy from lectures and dissecting human cadavers, by drawing replicas of ancient statues made of casts or engravings provided by the school, and also by drawing clothed live models. Only men could study and draw nude live models, which allowed a greater variety of subject matter and technique. Limits enforced by the Academy for women inhibited their performance

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[86] Harris, *Women Artists, 1550-1950,* 58.
[87] Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 71-72.
[88] Nancy Mowell Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 17. It is unclear if he became angry because she deserted her family or because she pursued a career as an artist.

artistically. Unfortunately, American artists typically found work only as portraitists since the Academy did not provide much in the way of exhibitions, dealers, or collectors of art, and art consumers favored portraiture above all other genres in America during Cassatt's Academy years.[89] Cassatt desired much more than portraiture. She wished to become a "figure painter and thus her paintings have subjects," and Europe provided the instruction and the resources to implement her ambition and improve her technique and style.[90]

After the Civil War ended, Cassatt traveled to Europe with her mother in December of 1865 to study works of the old masters displayed in the museums, against her father's wishes.[91] In Paris at the Louvre, she could study composition and color techniques of artists such as the Renaissance masters. America would not open a museum like the Louvre until 1870, when the Metropolitan Museum in New York opened; therefore, artists would only have access to plaster sculptures and engravings to study and copy at the American academies.[92] Many of Cassatt's future art colleagues, Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Édouard Manet (1832-1883), and Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) also copied at the Louvre. These artists would eventually make up the radical group known as the Impressionists. Women could not attend the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; however, Cassatt managed to gain the assistance and instruction of a professor from the École, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), and she became his private pupil.[93] Cassatt traveled to the French countryside of Barbizon in 1867 to study landscape and the peasant representations of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875). She later studied the works of Thomas Couture (1815-1879), Manet's teacher, who "offered the example of a dramatic

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[89] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt,* 73.
[90] Ibid., 105.
[91] Ibid., 75.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle,* 18.

and rugged painting style achieved through a bolder and freer application of paint and less moderated tonal oppositions" that Cassatt later practiced in her own works.[94]

Cassatt submitted for the first time at the Paris Salon in 1867, but they refused her work. She submitted her next piece under the pseudonym Mary Stevenson, titled *The Mandolin Player* (fig. 11), which received admittance into the Paris Salon in 1868. Her acceptance in the 1868 Salon represented a major triumph for Cassatt—a female received public recognition in a male-dominated profession.[95] The 1868 exhibition in the Paris Salon included works by the future Impressionist artists such as Manet, Degas, Claude Monet (1840-1926), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). *The Mandolin Player* presents a young woman with an instrument resting on her lap seated against an unadorned dark background. Cassatt focuses on the upper half of the figure, with only the knee visible on the lower half to illustrate that the figure is seated. A light illuminates the right side of the canvas, which brings attention to the figure's left hand and the ring on the middle finger. The exaggerated brightness of light on the figure's muslin and ring directs the viewer's gaze to the heavy use of paint. Cassatt used rough brushstrokes, which suggests during that period a masculine touch rather than a feminine one. The only local color visible in the red sash also reveals the abrasive quality of Cassatt's painterly brushstroke. Cassatt asks the viewer to take notice of her technique rather than focus on the music-playing figure, which appears plain, simple, and unimportant. The figure's neck and right side of the face also expose heavy use of paint, while the rest of the painting remains subdued by shadow with light brushstrokes and connotes a more acceptable feminine touch.

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[94] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt,* 84.
[95] Ibid., 82.

Cassatt juxtaposed her femininity and her masculine force in *The Mandolin Player* through painterly brushstrokes. A letter from May Alcott to her family in Concord about Cassatt, with whom she had the privilege to take tea, enforces this argument: "being very lively and a woman of real genius, [Cassatt] will be a first-class light as soon as her pictures get a little circulated and known, for they are handled in a masterly way, with a touch of strength one seldom finds coming from a woman's fingers."[96] Not only did Cassatt handle the brush in a "masterly way," but also the figure's clearly articulated eyes demonstrate Cassatt's skill to portray expressive demeanors. Expressive demeanors would become a characteristic of Cassatt's in an attempt to present women as subjects engaged in their own activities, rather than as objects created for male pleasure. She opposed the traditional representation of a woman painted by a man. Already at the age of twenty-four, Cassatt had entered the patriarchal society as a nonconformist and begun to make a name and style for herself, as the letter by Alcott illustrates.

At the start of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), Cassatt and her mother returned to the United States, where she met up with other American artists she worked with in Paris. Her parents supported her financially, but felt that she should pay the expenses that accrued from her career as an artist, such as her studio, materials, travel, and models.[97] She decided to exhibit her works in Pittsburgh, New York and later in Chicago in an attempt to sell them, until the Great Chicago Fire destroyed her works on October 8, 1871.[98] With nothing left to sell to finance her career, she resorted to copying. Copying eventually led her to a commission offered by a bishop to paint copies of two

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[96] May Alcott Nieriker to Abigail May Alcott, (November 1876), in *May Alcott*: *A Memoir*, ed. Caroline Ticknor (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1928), 152.
[97] Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 65.
[98] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt,* 89.

famous religious works in Europe for his cathedral in Pittsburgh.[99] The frescos, works completed by Correggio, resided in Parma. Cassatt pursued her career without the financial aid of a husband or family. Although she had nothing left from the fire, she maintained her ambition to become an artist in a world that belonged to men, even if it meant she must resort to painting copies of masters' works rather than producing her own works to earn a living.

Like Vigée-Lebrun before her, Cassatt demonstrated her skills as a painter by imitating the work of Renaissance masters. Cassatt headed back to Europe, touring Italy, Spain, and Belgium to study the old masters and complete her commission for the Pittsburgh cathedral. She gained worldly attention and popularity with her finished copies and personal works, such as *Two Women Throwing Flowers During the Carnival*, 1872 (fig. 13).[100] While in Parma, Cassatt seized the opportunity to copy Correggio's *Il Giorno,* 1527 (fig. 14, detail), and she attempted the spatial and expressive techniques applied by Correggio in her *Flowers During the Carnival.*[101] The detail of *Il Giorno* depicts the heads of the Virgin, the infant Child, and Mary Magdalene nearly touching each other. The spatial relations of the figures give the work depth, visible with the distant landscape scene in the background and the heads set at different heights with the Virgin's head at the tallest point. The canvas also provides the viewer with a sense of depth by the foreshortened hand of the saint that holds the infant's foot. Linking gestures appear in this work, apparent in the placement of the hands of each figure on one another. The Virgin holds the Child in her arms, the Child grasps the saint's hair, and the saint gently clutches the Child's foot. The expressive gestures provide the work with an

[99] Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 66.
[100] Ibid., 66-67.
[101] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 92.

intimate and mystical feel, as the women gaze adoringly at and contemplate the future of the Child, revealed in their tranquil facial expressions.

Cassatt would try her hand at Correggio's skill. She places her own figures in *Flowers During the Carnival* in a confined space in close proximity, following Correggio's example of aligning the heads in different directions, and includes a linking gesture visible in the farthest figure's hand that rests on the foremost figure's shoulder. These two women appear as close companions, suggested by the friendly embrace. Without a background, Cassatt had to master the facial expressions and gestures of the figures to provide an impact on the viewer.[102] *Flowers During the Carnival* appears to capture the moment after the dark-haired figure has thrown her flower, seen just below her open hand, and the light-haired figure prepares to let go of the flower in her right hand. The figures' placements so close to the foreground due to the confined space of the canvas places the viewer within the scene, as though standing on the balcony next to the women. They both smile at unseen spectators and exhibit pleasure and amusement as they engage in an unknown event that occurs outside of the canvas, away from the viewer. Cassatt includes every detail that denotes pleasure, such as the dimples in the cheeks from the curvature of the lips, the wrinkles that appear under the eyes when the cheeks rise up, and the slight incline of the head as they observe in admiration the goings on before them. The expressions, poses, and gestures of the figures present the basis of the painting's composition, which overshadows the background. Cassatt's brilliant brushwork to illustrate hand gestures and facial expressions bears resemblance to Correggio's *Il Giorno*. She demonstrates her skill in imitating and altering an old

[102] Ibid., 94.

master's composition and technique. She would later use linking and expressive gestures in her mother and child oeuvre beginning in 1880.[103]

Cassatt entered the Salon of 1874 for the first time as "Mary Cassatt" and Degas first took notice of her work in the same year. He claimed: "Here is someone who feels as I do;" however, he would not ask her to join the Independent group until 1877.[104] The freedom to express her own views of the world around her and depict her own subject matter attracted Cassatt to the Impressionists. She informed her biographer, Achille Segard, that after another work submitted to the Salon in 1877 was rejected, "Degas made [her] promise never to submit anything to the Salon again, and to exhibit with his friends in the group of the Impressionists."[105] She was especially close to Degas. She wrote of his invitation for her to participate: "I accepted gladly. At last I could work absolutely independently, without worrying about the possible opinion of a jury…I hated conventional art. I was beginning to live."[106] Cassatt and Degas shared the unconventional belief that the artist as an individual deserved "the right to choose their own subject matter and expression, and to exhibit free from the restrictions set by the official French Academy."[107] Cassatt's family moved in with her in Paris in 1877, which provided her with life models for her paintings. Her desire to become a figure painter began to take shape once she joined the Impressionists.

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[103] Norma Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood?," in *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), 39.
[104] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 91.
[105] Ibid., 115. This quote was written in a letter from Cassatt to Achille Segard in 1913.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Susan Fillin Yeh, "Mary Cassatt's Images of Women," *Art Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), 359.

The Impressionists resisted the art canon and set about to create an art that gave meaning to the modern individual's joyous daily activities. They experimented with new techniques, brushstrokes, and images. Meyer Schapiro wrote of the Impressionists:

> What they shared was not just a single trait, but a set of related aims, which individual members realized in different degrees—all of them were devoted to an ideal of modernity that included the imagining of the actually seen as part of the common inclusive world of the spectacle, in opposition to the then-current official taste for history, myth, and imagined worlds.[108]

The Impressionists depicted reality in their works that consisted of everyday scenes, which exhibited the fleeting essence of life in a modern society. Schapiro adds: "These paintings possess…an imagery of the environment as a field of freedom of movement and an object of sensory delight in everyday life."[109] The viewer not only observed a moment caught on canvas, but could relate to many of the activities captured by the artist since the moment depicted modern pastimes. Cassatt utilized this thematic rendition of the Impressionists by providing subjects that pertained to her sex and status, which enabled her to create a feminist portrayal by choosing customary acts expected of women in the appropriate setting during her day, such as embroidering, knitting, taking tea, and caring for children. While she chose to join the radical group of artists, she clung to feminine ideals exhibited in her works.

Impressionism attracted women since it justified depictions of domesticity, with which women had familiarity.[110] Cassatt's choice of space typically depicted in her art consisted of the private sphere, or domestic space, such as drawing rooms, dining rooms,

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[108] Meyer Schapiro, *Impressionism: Reflections and Perceptions* (New York: George Braziller, 1997), 10.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Chadwick, "Separate but Unequal: Women's Sphere and the New Art," in *Women, Art, and Society*, 232.

private gardens, bedrooms, and also public spaces where polite society engaged in recreation, such as boating, theatres, and the park.[111] Cassatt's 1880 *The Tea* (fig. 12) presents an intimate, feminine occasion, a traditional tea ritual between a hostess and her visitor, set in the private sphere of the home. The two women sit on a decorated sofa, as though reflecting on a conversation that just ended. The guest, positioned in the center of the canvas, sips her tea in the proper manner with her pinky finger extended and the plate resting in her other hand. She wears her gloves and hat, which identifies her as the visitor. The hostess reclines back in her seat, without a hat or gloves. The attention to the proper attire expected of the visitor and the hostess informs the viewer that the artist has chosen to depict a visit of friends rather than two family members taking tea. Both stare off at something outside of the canvas; neither figure acknowledges the viewer. Cassatt conceals the visitor's face by placing the cup in front of her face as she sips from it and only reveals her averted eyes, while the hostess's hand on her mouth and facial profile obscure her face. Cassatt does not focus on their beauty in this painting. Cassatt's characterization of these women does not permit the viewer to participate in the moment since it appears the figures engage in an activity of their own with an unseen party. This directs the viewer's attention to the details of the work: the wallpaper, which adds depth to the painting and matches the color of the upholstered sofa and tea table, the bone china cups and silver tea set that signify wealth and family heirlooms, the seams in the dresses worn by the figures that manifests Cassatt's keen eyesight, and the painting on the wall that suggests the feminine space presented on canvas. The effects of light appear in this image as though a window allows for light to seep into the room, seen in the hostess' hair

[111] Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 54.

and in the reflection off the silver teapots and tray, which gives the scene a realistic appearance. This work demands the viewer to take notice of the artist's work, attention to detail, and painterly brushstroke, as does her signature at the bottom left corner of the painting.

Pollock argues that the compressed pictorial margin in many of Cassatt's paintings allude to the constricted social space in which women resided.[112] Nochlin asserts that women who chose to depict a woman in her home who partakes in her daily rituals surrounded by the walls of her interior prison not only shows the oppression of women, but also that women can present this idea on canvas for all to take notice. [113] These works advertise to others the oppression of women, but the women depicted on canvas cling to their femininity as they embrace their roles. Art allowed female artists to speak and expose prejudices of gender and represent their culture without stepping out of their feminine ideals. Cassatt's *The Tea* transgresses the limits imposed on artists during the nineteenth century. She ignores the canon implemented by the French Academy as she executes her own technique and style and creates an image that speaks out to others of the confinements of womanhood. Nevertheless, by depicting feminine scenes, she illuminated the patriarchal ideologies of her society and maintained respect in the public mind.

Cassatt enjoyed rendering women outside the home as spectators in the public arena. In doing so, she presented the woman as the subject of the painting. She accomplished this detail by averting the gaze of the main figure, who focuses on a spectacle unseen by the viewer, thereby inhibiting the figure from becoming the object of

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[112] Ibid., 63.
[113] Nochlin, "Some Women Realists," in *Women, Art, and Power*, 97.

the viewer's gaze. The figure becomes the looker and active participant in the spectacle. Degas greatly influenced Cassatt and his love for the theatre appears in a few of Cassatt's works, such as the *At the Opera*, 1879 (fig. 14).[114] Cassatt's theatre oeuvre depicts women as independent persons in public who pursue interests other than domestic duties as mothers and wives. *At the Opera* presents a woman interested in cultural events. The woman stares intently through her binoculars at the events taking place on stage beyond the canvas. She stands alone, which suggests she participates voluntarily in the spectacle. No one has forced her to attend the opera. The dark colored high-neck dress indicates business attire worn during daytime hours when women strolled the streets of Paris to shop, so the figure most likely attends a matinée.[115] Not all women must conform to the adage "a woman's place is in the home." This woman represents the new modern woman of Paris in the nineteenth century, a woman of the public marketplace and arena. Perhaps Cassatt chose to depict herself in this painting to illustrate an unmarried woman's freedom from the confinements of motherhood and marriage.

Another important aspect of *At the Opera* exists in the fact that this figure does not represent the typical female beauty painted for the enjoyment of others. The binoculars obscure her face and the black dress deflects unwanted gazes; however, from inside the picture another gaze appears. A man leans over the balcony holding binoculars of his own and stares keenly at the woman. She actively directs her attention towards the performance on stage, which averts an invitation for the spectator to stare at her as an object. The spectator becomes the object of the painting for the viewer. Both spectator and viewer stare at the woman as passive participants in the scene and as mirror images

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[114] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 141.
[115] Yeh, "Mary Cassatt's Images of Women," 360.

of each other.[116] The audience in the background and the viewer become part of the spectacle. Cassatt's technique challenges the typical male depictions of women in the public sphere as objects to gape at, and in this image the male becomes the object. Cassatt presents the female figure in black as the subject of the painting occupied with the events before her; however, the figure cannot escape the male gaze from the audience, reiterating the notion that women in public became a sight for male stares. Greg M. Thomas argues that *At the Opera* is "the most self-consciously feminist painting of the age. Few images can rival it as an exposé of a pervasive male gaze dominating public space and converting women into visual objects."[117] In both *The Tea* and *At the Opera*, the female figures engage in activities of their own, unaware of the viewer's stare. Cassatt set forth to break free from the chains that constrain women as objects for men. Cassatt did not create these images to appease men's desires, but rather to present the modern women participating in her own pursuit and desires.

In 1880, Cassatt turned to the timeless image of mother and child, which implemented her modern vision. The nostalgic subject matter she painted heightened her fame.[118] This same year in France, the Camille Sée Law was passed, an educational law that led to the establishment of secondary schools for girls; however, these secondary schools did not prepare them for college, which made professions difficult to acquire without a degree.[119] Motherhood still presented the best option for women in France during the nineteenth century. Just as Vigée-Lebrun had done in the eighteenth century, Cassatt illustrated the joyous rewards of motherhood by presenting the physical intimacy

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[116] Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference*, 75.
[117] Greg M. Thomas, *Impressionist Children: Childhood, Family, and Modern Identity in French Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 80.
[118] Harris, *Women Artists, 1550-1950,* 239.
[119] Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman," 37.

between a mother and her precious child, or the adoration of a new child by its mother. Perhaps Cassatt's mother and child images represent propagandistic messages against infanticide, a critical issue in France during the late nineteenth century.[120] Her depictions of motherly love and innocent children would undoubtedly force a woman to reconsider murdering or abandoning her own child. Women might consider the consequences of having a child when choosing roles outside of motherhood, such as prostitution, which served as a common career choice for working-class women during the nineteenth century.[121]

As described above, Cassatt borrowed the linking and expressive gestures from Renaissance works, such as Correggio's *Il Giorno,* to use in her mother and child images. She also borrowed from another master's work, the Mannerist Parmigianino's painting *Madonna of the Long Neck*, 1534-39 (fig. 16). His influence appears in Cassatt's *Mother About to Wash her Sleepy Child* (c. 1880, fig. 17).[122] Cassatt takes an image of Madonna and Child painted by a master and innovates it by depicting a mother and child engaged in an activity, such as bathing a child. Parmigianino's painting depicts the Christ child with limbs sprawled out in his mother's lap. The Madonna gazes adoringly at her Son while she holds his limp body. Cassatt presents a similar image with a mother who holds upon her lap a sleepy child who appears fully relaxed, evident by his dangling limbs. Cassatt's mother and child gaze intently into each other's eyes. Cassatt does not imbue the scene with sentimentalism; rather, she illustrates an everyday family scene of a mother engaged in her role as nurturer and caretaker of her child. The use of white paint

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[120] Ibid., 40.
[121] Nochlin, "Morisot's *Wet Nurse*: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in *Women, Art, and Power*, 44.
[122] Stewart Buettner, "Images of Modern Motherhood in the Art of Morisot, Cassatt, Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Autumn 1986-Winter, 1987), 17.

throughout the composition along with "the primary lines of the work—the child's legs, the arm of the chair, the mother's left shoulder and the direction of her glance—lead to a focal point, the child's head."[123] The child becomes the subject of the painting. Baths were considered private moments taken alone, so Cassatt's representation of the act of bathing presents the viewer with an intimate moment shared between the figures on canvas, which people did not observe in daily life.[124]

Cassatt has reconstructed a traditional image of Madonna and Child and the "happy mother" motif of the eighteenth century into a modern day depiction of a mother's role by rendering a psychological exchange between mother and child. Correggio's influence becomes visible in the detailed facial expression of the child in *Sleepy Child* and the linking gesture between mother and child, displayed in the child's grip of the mother's fingers that rest beneath the child's tiny hand. The child's face appears rosy as though fighting back tears from sleepiness. The child's folded arm with hand behind its head suggests a tired baby who just finished rubbing its sleepy eyes and the arm has slipped past the cheek, possibly due to wet tears. The mother's solid form provides a safe and secure place for the child to doze off on, as the half-shut eyes indicate the sleepy child intends to do. Pollock asserts: "Rather than reducing scenes of childcare to merely modern-day settings for an emblematic icon of maternity, her work uses the space of domestic childcare to invent an image of the child as an emerging psychological entity."[125] Cassatt's mother prepares the child for adulthood by performing a ritualistic activity necessary for the health and well being of the child.

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[123] Ibid.
[124] Thomas, *Impressionist Children*, 87.
[125] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 191.

A Goodnight Hug (fig. 18), painted by Cassatt in 1880, demonstrates another interesting alteration of a mother and child. The broken brushstrokes applied on the canvas suggest a moment elapsed in time that Cassatt captures.[126] Both mother and child turn their heads away from the viewer in an intimate embrace. The colors of the wall and the child's clothing blend together. This blending directs the eye to the hand of the mother who holds her child close to her neck, and also to the arm of the child that wraps around the mother's neck. The distance between the figures has diminished since *Sleepy Child*, but the psychological relationship has grown.[127] The confined space becomes that of the figures. They do not invite the viewer to participate in the intimate moment shared between them; instead, Cassatt leaves the viewer to acknowledge the emotional passion the gesture evokes. Both *Sleepy Child* and *Goodnight Hug* illustrate the physical and emotional dependence of the toddlers on their mothers for nurturing and love. Cassatt, a female painter, innovated timeless portrayals of mother and child images without jeopardizing her reputation by focusing on the modern conceptions of childcare and the physical and emotional dependence of children. Evidence of her success appears in the mass production of copies of her mother and child images seen in journals and magazines distributed throughout America and France.[128]

Cassatt went on to design several panels on the subject of "The Modern Woman" for the interior of the Woman's Building at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The Exposition dedicated the Woman's Building to the progress of women throughout history as depicted in art and the "decorative crafts."[129] The "New Women"

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[126] Nochlin, "Morisot's *Wet Nurse*," 51.
[127] Buettner, "Images of Modern Motherhood," 17.
[128] Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman," 39.
[129] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 36.

of the nineteenth century wanted recognition for their ability to become artists, doctors, educators, and other skilled professions, not just as mothers and caretakers.[130] Cassatt's *Modern Woman* mural (fig. 19) presents a bold vision of women's agency in the modern world. Unfortunately, the mural mysteriously disappeared and now exists only in photographs.[131]

Modern Woman's left panel (fig. 20) depicts girls in modern dress who chase after fame. Fame appears as a child-like unclad female who guides the women upward as she freely ascends towards the heavens. Norma Broude attributes this panel's resemblance to a wall painting in Pompeii, *Cupid in Flight*, which depicts three women chasing a winged cupid, a symbol of love.[132] According to Broude, Cassatt took an ancient depiction and an established label of womanliness and transposed it into a modern image of women, which implies that women also deserve the right to freely pursue fame and success.[133] The central panel (fig. 21) introduces an outdoor environment where women collectively carry baskets brimming with fruit plucked from the abundant fruit trees. One of the young girls in the bottom right corner gazes across the canvas to the central figures, which directs the viewer to the woman who stands on a ladder and passes the freshly picked fruit to the young girl beneath her. Their hands clasp together, which barely reveals the fruit passed form one to the other; yet, the message is clear—the woman passes the fruit of knowledge onto the next generation. This particular image inspired some of Cassatt's later mother and child images of women who pick fruit and pass it on to their children. In this particular image, Cassatt inverts an ancient depiction of the

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[130] Ibid., 47.
[131] Ibid., 65.
[132] Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood," in *Reclaiming Female Agency*, ed. Mary D. Garrard and Norma Broude (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 260.
[133] Ibid.

Garden of Eden and its forbidden fruit. She transforms the garden into a modern orchard that supplies knowledge to women. This defied the theory that women should not receive the same education as man. This panel suggests that women can aspire to become someone other than mothers, and young girls will perhaps gain the opportunity for a better education that their mother's did not receive. The right panel (fig. 22) renders three modern women engaged in the arts of music and dance. One of the girls plays the banjo, a modern instrument of the nineteenth century, and another girl dances as she twirls her skirt, perhaps a reference to the style of dance popular in French cabarets during the period. Cassatt's *Modern Woman* mural of 1893 represents modern women free to seek "knowledge, art, and fame."[134] During this same year, Cassatt received a one-woman art show in Paris to display her artwork, which proved her acceptance into the mainstream art circle in both America and Paris.

Cassatt spoke through her paintings and demanded that women represent someone, not something. She challenged the patriarchal societal norms by trading motherhood for her profession and pursuing the typical male artist's path. She joined a radical group of artists, the Impressionists, who refused to limit themselves to the restrictions placed upon artists by the French Academy, and instead, chose to paint subjects that depicted the modern world. She transformed the women in her paintings into subjects engaged in activities to please themselves, rather than as objects to please the male gaze. Her mother and child images reflect a realistic and honest portrayal of childcare and development, and present the figures as though they exist in their own time and space, which leaves the viewer unable to participate in the intimate exchange. Cassatt

[134] Ibid.

replaced the role of motherhood with the focus of the child's physical and emotional dependence on the mother. Throughout all these challenges she undertook, she never lost her sense of femininity in the public eye. She presented women in feminine roles and engaged in accepted female activities, produced images of motherhood and childhood, and her unmarried status permitted her to work in a profession without constant scrutiny. She chose a life of art over marriage and motherhood, which resulted in her fame and success. Norma Broude claims "Cassatt maintained [her] independence from the legal subordination and practical subservience mandated by patriarchal marriage and family, the societal norm for women in her era."[135] Her idea of having it all was wealth and reputation, a domestic sphere that included her immediate family, extended family, and her personal friends, and most importantly, a profession that provided intrinsic reward.[136] Public and institutional obstacles prevented women from excelling in their individual talents. Cassatt sought out privileges when available or possible, pushed forth in a male-dominated world and profession, and sought recognition for her talents. In 1927, the city of Philadelphia bestowed a Memorial Exhibition in her honor, a year after her death.[137] The recognition and reputation she sought during her life continued to flourish in America and Paris, as well as many other countries throughout Europe after her death. The painter of modern women and children succeeded.

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[135] Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman," 273.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 27.

Chapter Three

Brontë's Jane Eyre: A Plain, Obscure, and Little Feminist

Ambitious and talented literary women, such as Charlotte Brontë, attempted to make the best of their constricted living spaces by creating products they could market to the public. Some women chose to write poetry, others preferred to create commercial advice manuals, and many favored to compose novels, such as Brontë opted to do when she formulated *Jane Eyre*. This chapter focuses on literary expectations of women during the Victorian period, Brontë's ambition to pursue a literary profession, and how living in a patriarchal society influenced her creation of *Jane Eyre*. The focus shifts to a detailed look into Brontë's title character, as well as other female characters in the novel, and points to obvious references that illustrate the typical life and expectations of women in the nineteenth century. The chapter concludes with references to interior space as it defined women, how Jane retaliated against the traditional conventions of the Victorian period, and how she maintained her feminine image at the end of the novel.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in literary sales since the market provided a place to sell books. As a result of increased job opportunities, the public had more capital to spend on personal interests, such as reading material, which enabled female authors to gain popularity and a greater number of readers.[138] Despite the fact that women remained at home to create their texts, writing provided a means for them to enter the public sphere with published works sold in the literary market. According to Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen, who focus on females during the Victorian period,

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[138] Hume and Offen, introduction to Part III, 280.

literary women during the early half of the nineteenth century produced "the best English writing," which was "nourished in rural parsonages and country cottages, as the careers of the Brontë sisters" demonstrate.[139] These women could increase earnings for their family if they published their works and sold to the public without drawing negative criticism to their class status, but only if the writer adhered to the patriarchal conventions of the period.

Most of the texts written during the Victorian period emphasized the role of a mistress in her home and depicted female characters as doting daughters, mothers, and wives. Female authors who stepped outside of the feminine boundaries of the domestic sphere created discord among society because they pursued a profession considered masculine, which required intellect that women supposedly did not have.[140] Some critics felt that a woman who chose a literary career exhibited more passion and received undesired popularity among the public, unlike the ideal woman. Critics argued that literary women chose to stray from their femininity, threaten their marriages, and wreak havoc in their homes; whereas, the "angel in the house" looked to improve the talents of her husband, the provider of her family. In a letter written by Robert Southey to Brontë, dated March of 1837, he argues that women should not disregard their womanly duties in the home to seek pleasures in writing:

> The daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and unprofitable, you will be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. [141]

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[139] Ibid., 280.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1908), 102.

To avoid gendered criticism, such as the neglect of feminine duties suggested by Southey, many women resorted to male pseudonyms: the Brontë sisters chose the names Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Brontë's novel *Jane* Eyre did very well, although most people thought a male author had written it. Had Brontë placed her own name on the first edition, she might never have managed to publish *Jane Eyre*.

Brontë's realistic portrayal of a female protagonist in the nineteenth century, faced with the confinements of marriage, illustrates the "downside" of the Victorian era and its associated attitudes. *Jane Eyre* paints a picture for the reader of what a woman might have experienced during this period. Mary Wollstonecraft had argued in 1792 for the rights of women, access to coeducation, equality in legal matters, opportunities in the work force, and the freedom to maintain their own finances and properties in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.[142] Women continued to fight for these privileges in the nineteenth century. During Brontë's lifetime, most middle-class women had one of two options: marriage and motherhood or governess, with the latter considered a less honorable role in society.[143] Just as Rousseau had argued in the eighteenth century that women should remain in the home as mothers rather than seek careers in the public sphere, Victorian society continued to hold the same belief in the year of the publication of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, 1847.[144] Unlike boys who received an education that could prepare them for careers in the professional world, middle-class girls received a lesser education at a finishing school, much like the all-girl's school Jane attends in the novel.

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[142] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, (London: T. F. Unwin, 1891).
[143] Lilian R. Furst, "The Angel Gone Astray," in *Approaches to Teaching Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary,'* ed. Laurence M. Porter and Eugene F. Gray (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995), 21.
[144] Rousseau, *Émile, Julie, and Other Writings*. Book Five enforces this idea of the importance of motherhood and child bearing.

Here, they would learn to play piano, draw, and speak French, all of which might attract a good husband. The Victorian period viewed education as a means of mobility, a chance for middle-class women to move up in status, as *Jane Eyre* demonstrates.[145] Personal accomplishments and personal fulfillment did not hold much concern for society. An education provided women with the means to manage the household affairs, proper etiquette to entertain her husband's circle of friends, and how to perform role of motherhood.[146] Writing in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Sewell propounds on the subject of a girl's education: "girls are to dwell in quiet homes, amongst a few friends; to exercise a noiseless influence, to be submissive and retiring."[147] Brontë's Jane Eyre defies these principles.

Brontë's female heroine represents a woman who seeks self-worth and personal significance. Jane asks herself after Rochester attempts to subdue her strength of character: "Who in the world cares for you." She discovers: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself."[148] Jane does not relate herself to other functions in life such as a governess or a lover. She finds in herself personal significance, which violated the perception of the ideal Victorian woman. Brontë used her skill as a writer to explore women's rights and responsibilities, and Jane's pilgrimage to maturity presents to the reader many challenges women faced in a patriarchal society.

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[145] Gelpi, introduction in *Victorian Women*, 15.
[146] Ibid., 16.
[147] Elizabeth Missing Sewell, *Principles of Education, Drawn from Nature and Revelation, and Applied to Female Education in the Upper Classes (New York, 1866), 396-97, 450-51*, reprinted in *Victorian Women*, eds. Hellerstein et al., 69.
[148] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 270.

Brontë was born on April 21, 1816, the third of six children, to Patrick and Maria Branwell Brontë. [149] Her mother died in 1821, and three years later, she and three of her sisters attended the School for Clergymen's Daughters, Cowan Bridge, which she used in *Jane Eyre* as a reference for Lowood Institution. Her oldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, became ill from consumption and returned home in 1825, only to die shortly after. Gaskell records in her autobiography of Charlotte's love for her sister and the abuse she suffered at Cowan Bridge:

> Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give. Her heart, to the latest day on which we met, still beat with unavailing indignation at the worrying and the cruelty to which her gentle, patient, dying sister had been subjected…[150]

Charlotte would illustrate in *Jane Eyre* the mistreatment girls received from teachers at schools like Cowan Bridge and the horrible illnesses incurred as a result of improper diet and unsanitary facilities. Charlotte and Emily also returned home that same year in fear that they might suffer the same fate. In 1829, the surviving Brontë children began writing about their childhood fantasies, the Kingdoms of Angria (Branwell and Charlotte) and Gondal (Anne and Emily).

In 1831, Charlotte left home to study at Roe Head and later became a teacher there. She eventually found work as a governess in two different households, which gave her the knowledge and experience needed to depict the career choice of her protagonist in *Jane Eyre*. She wrote in a letter to Emily about her role as governess for the Sidgwick family at Stonegappe House: "I have striven hard to be pleased with my new situation…I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no

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[149] All biographical information taken from Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1908).
[150] Ibid., 44.

existence, is not considered as a living rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill."[151] Many middle-class single women found work as governesses in other households, which provided an acceptable way to earn a living that did not affect their social status. Unfortunately, governesses received little pay for their employment, and their situation in another person's home stood between that of a servant and a family member. In this often uncomfortable setting, they became subject to possible mistreatment or uncertain lengths of service. According to Terry Eagleton, "the governess is a servant, trapped within a rigid social function which demands industriousness, subservience and self-sacrifice; but she is also an 'upper' servant, and so furnished with an imaginative awareness and cultivated sensibility which are precisely her stock-in-trade as a teacher."[152] She desires love from a family within the interior of a home, but the necessities and will to survive push her to seek service to earn her keep and follow principle. Charlotte loathed her role as a governess and desired instead to teach in a school. She and Emily moved to Brussels in 1842 to attend and study at Pensionatt Heger, where Charlotte eventually became a teacher.

Charlotte's experience in Brussels left her homesick, lonely, and depressed. She wrote to her best friend Ellen Nussey of her concerns: "I try to read, I try to write; but in vain. I then wander about from room to room, but the silence and loneliness of all the house weighs down one's spirits like lead."[153] This remark resounds in *Jane Eyre* as Jane paces the third floor at Thornfield. Charlotte returned home to assist her father whose eyesight was failing. His eventual blindness resulted in reduced earnings since he had to

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[151] From Charlotte Brontë "To Emily J. Brontë," June 8, 1839, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Mary Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), I, 190-91.
[152] Terry Eagleton, "Class Power and Charlotte Brontë," in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Barbara Timm Gates, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1990), 51.
[153] From Charlotte Brontë "To Ellen Nussey," October 13, 1843, *Letters of Brontë*, 334.

pay his curate additional wages for increased help at the parsonage. Charlotte chose to try her passion at writing once again, and hoped to publish the writings of her sister and her own works to sustain the family financially.[154] Charlotte desired to write, but she had to produce works worthy of the literary market to ensure that her family might maintain their home and health.

She published her first edition of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte's biographer, wrote:

> Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided…her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character…When a man becomes an author…he gives up something…But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother…a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice, nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others.[155]

Gaskell firmly believed that a woman's proper place rested in managing her home and caring for her family, but she also acknowledged that some women had special talents that they should not ignore, such as Charlotte's gift to write. In her biography of Charlotte, Gaskell explained the tragedy and despair the Brontë family suffered and asserted that writing enabled Charlotte to take responsibility and care for her family. What Charlotte wrote came from her own experiences, which did not present "good and pleasant people, doing only good and pleasant things," but emphasized sadness and unhappy characters acting out in unusual manners.[156] However, Charlotte's situation in life recorded on the pages of the manuscript and released into the public provided her and

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[154] Gaskell, *The Life of Brontë*, 96.
[155] Ibid., 237-38.
[156] Ibid., 238.

her family the financial security to eat, remain in their home, and fulfill her responsibilities to care for her father.

Brontë's *Jane Eyre* reveals to its readers a woman's journey through life from a young girl to a young woman. Jane searches for acceptance in a male-dominated world. Brontë paints a picture of the expected feminine ideals of Victorian women through many of the characters introduced throughout the novel, but she also presents a new image of women who desire an equal footing with their male counterparts, both in intellect and financial independence, and also who desire their own self-worth. Brontë's protagonist, Jane, seeks human companionship but will not sacrifice her integrity. Her unpropitious upbringing in the home of her unwelcoming and unloving aunt sets the stage for Jane to seek a better life with others who might shower her with love. She pursues a course uncommon of women during the nineteenth century by stepping outside of the domestic sphere to discover life and its true meaning.

Brontë incorporated a new genre of writing, the autobiography. The term "autobiography" was coined in the Victorian era and considered a masculine work because it detailed a man's professional career and intellectual growth. [157] According to Linda H. Peterson, Brontë succeeded as the first female writer to introduce the domestic realm into autobiographies.[158] Her novel presents a woman as the subject rather than the object of the novel. As Jane records her tale, she reminds her readers of the difficult decisions she must make and the challenges confronted by women of her status. She calls out to her readers to acknowledge her desperation to escape the confinements of patriarchy. Often throughout the novel, Brontë illustrates Jane's disdain for conventional

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[157]Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 18 and 20.
[158] Ibid., 90.

views of the ideal Victorian woman as the "angel in the house." An example occurs after Rochester describes her as "a very angel" and as his "comforter," and she responds in protest: "I am not an angel…and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself."[159] She refuses to become the angel that the patriarchal society expects of its women. She values self-worth, an unconventional idea during the nineteenth century for Victorian women. She represents a determined woman who pursues her own ambitions and a career while struggling with the "angel in the house" mentality of Victorian society. *Jane Eyre* personifies a revolutionary tale that establishes the modern woman and reveals the shifting of the feminine ideal from a man's point of view to a woman's.[160]

Gaskell recounts in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* on the decision to create the character Jane Eyre:

> [Charlotte Brontë] once told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, 'I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.'[161]

Brontë created Jane Eyre to illustrate to her sisters that an unconventional character, "plain, obscure, and little," a rebellious female who led a remarkable life, could provide an interesting new feminine image and personality for a fictional work. A new woman began to emerge during the nineteenth century, demonstrated by Brontë's Jane Eyre. In a sense, Jane Eyre represented Brontë herself. Both experienced the loss of family, attended an all-girl's school away from home, and pursued the role of governess to escape the confines of home life in hopes to catch a glimpse of what the world had to

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[159] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 221.
[160] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 337.
[161] Gaskell, *The Life of Brontë*, 215.

offer. They faced obstacles set forth by patriarchal demands that stated women must act a certain way and that the private sphere presented the only hope for a woman's success. Jane and Brontë defied the social conventions of the Victorian period by securing their financial independence in a patriarchal society.

In Brontë's opening line of *Jane Eyre*, Jane utters to her readers: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day."[162] Immediately, Brontë begins her novel with an allusion that women have no escape from the patriarchal society they live in. Jane, an orphan child, describes the "cold winter wind," dreadful," and "somber" outside the house, while her cousins and Aunt Reed sit beside the hearth in the drawing-room. The description of the Reeds surrounding a warm fire together implies the warmth of family, and Jane, who sits in isolation near the cold panes of a window, suggests her loneliness and status as an outcast among her own kindred. Through the voice of young Jane, Brontë sets her readers up for a suspenseful and tragic tale of a young girl presented with obstacles that will either make or break her. Jane's strong will and passionate heart provide the tools, but she must acknowledge and utilize them correctly if she hopes to triumph.

The first chapters of the novel illustrate Jane's status viewed from the eyes of her own family. Although Jane lives with her aunt and three cousins, a wealthy and refined family, Brontë clearly defines Jane's social position among them as inferior. An example of her inferiority appears during an encounter with her cousin John. He informs her of her lowly station within the Reed's home: "'you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's

[162] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 5.

children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at mama's expense.'"[163] Jane receives an upper-class education and upbringing while living under the care of the Reeds; yet, she remains penniless and forced to accept the charity of others to survive, which gives her the appearance of a second-class resident under her aunt's roof. She receives, at times, worse treatment than the servants, and Mrs. Reed does not require the servants to pay Jane any respect. One of the servants, Miss Abbot, also reminds Jane of her subordinate position within the Reed home: "And you ought not think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed…They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them."[164] At such an impressionable age, Jane's family and their servants instill in her a lack of self-worth and identity because she has no wealth, which evokes a sense of how many young women felt during the Victorian period who did not come from affluent families. In a patriarchal society, if young women could not bring forth some financial worth to a marriage, they most often remained unmarried and under the care and support of their own families as financial burdens.[165]

In the second chapter, Jane receives a fierce punishment from her aunt after she physically defends herself from her cousin John. Aunt Reed imprisons her in the red room. This scene not only emphasizes Jane's isolation from her own family, but also provides the reader with the template for the larger story line. Brontë again highlights the political and social conditions of Jane's life. Jane constantly struggles to discover freedom, love, and belonging with others. As a woman, she will face physical and

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[163] Ibid., 8.
[164] Ibid., 10.
[165] Adrienne Rich, "Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman," in *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 470.

emotional abuse from masculine figures throughout her life. Although released from this prison, she will continue to face exclusion and remain trapped in a penniless state. Her lack of finances will continue to threaten her independence and her second-class status will affect her ability to express her thoughts and opinions openly to others. Jane describes the red room to her readers: “no jail was ever more secure.” She provides details of the room that imply her inferiority, such as the “massive pillars” that supported the bed, “two large windows…shrouded in festoons,” and a chair that resembled a “pale throne.”[166] Her uncle died in this room, and the décor remains masculine and frightening to the young child. She is locked in, unable to escape. She questions her existence among the Reeds and the suffering she receives at the hands of her own kindred. Brontë’s depiction of Jane’s imprisonment in the red room symbolizes the oppression of all women during the patriarchal nineteenth century.

In this important scene in the red room, Brontë displays the early awakenings of a young girl’s consciousness towards her own self-regard. Jane begins to hallucinate in the red room, and in terror she screams for help. In this moment, her passion evolves and a new Jane Eyre is born who chooses a life of dignity and pride. After Jane’s release from the red room, she calls Mrs. Reed a “bad, hard hearted...[and] deceitful woman” for imprisoning Jane without mercy, and Jane declares that she will not live in a place where she feels unloved and unwanted.[167] After she expresses her thoughts to her aunt, Jane feels her soul begin "to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt... as if an invisible bond had burst and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for

[166] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 11.
[167] Ibid., 30.

liberty."[168] Jane starts to think for herself and value her own existence as a human being. She envisions a life of warmth and happiness, if only she can escape her oppressive aunt. She is reminded of the red room throughout her life as she faces other circumstances that threaten her independence and self-worth. She will project this willpower towards men in the future and persevere regardless of the obstacles women faced during the Victorian period.

Throughout the novel, Brontë uses words like "liberty," "escape," and "freedom" to imply the longing of women to rid themselves of the expectations of the ideal Victorian woman. She also uses words such as "prison," "oppression," "and "submission" to suggest the confinements a woman experiences in a patriarchal society. In the second chapter, Jane exclaims to her readers the harshness of the punishment she received for defending herself from the violent actions of her male cousin:

> 'Unjust!—unjust!' said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die.[169]

Here, Brontë provides a feminist view of the negative effects on women as they try to maintain the stereotypical role expected of them. Jane, although young, understands the injustice of her punishment and sees death as a possible means of escape from the hardship she endures. Men defined the acceptability of women's roles in society during the nineteenth century. They expected women to act subservient, obedient, passive, and submissive as daughter and wife. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state the feminine virtues expected of women in *Madwoman in the Attic* as "modesty, gracefulness, purity,

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid., 12.

delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, [and] politeness," and conduct manuals preached these virtues to women so that they could become proper ladies and please their potential husbands.[170] None of these virtues enabled a woman to seek recognition or self-satisfaction for her own talents. Everything instilled in women from expectations of society to reading material required satisfaction for others. Whether married or not, women existed as objects and remained inferior to men.

After Jane's outburst towards her aunt, Mrs. Reed sends her to Lowood Institution, a charity school for female orphans and girls from low-income families. As the name suggests, Jane finds herself trapped and oppressed once again. Here, the girls learn to become governesses in the hopes they can support themselves, rather than become parasites on society. Prior to her acceptance, she meets the master of Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst. Jane refers to him as "a black pillar!...[a] straight, narrow, sable-clad, shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top…like a craved mask, placed above the shaft by way of the capital."[171] Brontë alludes to Brocklehurst as a phallic symbol. He serves as the first masculine patriarchal figure Jane encounters in the novel. Jane challenges Brocklehurst on their initial meeting. He expresses his belief of the importance of reciting the Psalms and claims "angels sing Psalms."[172] Jane replies that she does not like the Psalms and finds them uninteresting. She refuses to abide to the "angel in the house" mindset that her superior supports.

Although Jane challenges the master of her new school, her subordinate role continues when she attends Lowood. The girls are forced to shed their feminine traits and submit to the orders of God. Brocklehurst dictates that his "mission" from God is to

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[170] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* 23.
[171] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 26.
[172] Ibid., 27.

"mortify in these girls the lusts of flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel," and he orders their hair "cut off entirely."[173] Brocklehurst clearly desires a separation between social classes as the description provided by Jane of his own family illustrates. His wife wore "a costly velvet shawl, trimmed with ermine, and she wore a false front of curls," while his daughters wore "grey beaver hats…shaded with ostrich plumes" and they both had "light tresses, elaborately curled."[174] Brontë suggests that Brocklehurst views femininity as a fashion provided by middle-class wealth and that the poor working-class women must shed their individualistic feminine attributes so that a clear and distinct separation appears in the hierarchal class system. Once again, Jane must face her social position as an outcast in the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century.

Eventually, Jane becomes a teacher at Lowood but desires freedom from the monotonous life and daily tasks she endures. Brontë's novel captured readers, but also offended others since it rendered a woman who pursued a life of paid labor over marriage. Jane longs to escape the order and principles instilled in her from others and to experience the world, full of "hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, [which] awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek knowledge of life amidst its perils."[175] Jane's passion to discover a bigger world than that of marriage and dependence on others depicts a feminist view, contrary to the ideal Victorian woman who longed only for a good marriage and an elevated social status. Eventually, Jane accepts that the world does not offer freedom to women of her position, and she cries out instead:

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[173] Ibid., 54.
[174] Ibid., 55.
[175] Ibid., 72.

"grant me at least a new servitude!"[176] Although Jane continues to discover herself by pursuing her goals and dreams, she maintains her femininity by suppressing her passions. She becomes more socially acceptable by serving others and making herself useful to society. Jane follows the predestined path for an unmarried and penniless woman. She becomes a governess.

In *The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873*, Patricia Thomson asserts that governesses in most novels display submissive characters.[177] Brontë presents a woman quite the opposite in *Jane Eyre*. Jane refuses to submit to others, and instead exhibits unrestrained passion towards those she loves and admires. She claims her womanhood first, then her role as a governess, which poses a rebellious subject matter for the Victorian mindset. She never fails to acknowledge her self-value as a human being. Brontë's heroine does not depict the "angel in the house" image that Victorian readers and society expected from a woman writer. Brontë illustrates in *Jane Eyre* the need for women to recognize their self-worth, intellect, and ability to choose love and happiness over necessity.

While Jane represents a woman who challenges the social conventions, Bessie, Mrs. Reed's servant, and Mrs. Fairfax, Rochester's housekeeper, represent women who abide by the societal norms. Bessie marries within her social caste, where she and her family will remain a part of the working class. Mrs. Fairfax exemplifies the ideal Victorian woman. Upon Jane's first encounter with Mrs. Fairfax, Jane finds the housekeeper "occupied in knitting; a large cat sat demurely at her feet; nothing in short

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[176] Ibid.
[177] Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine*, 39.

was wanting to complete the ideal of domestic comfort."[178] Mrs. Fairfax keeps to the codes of separation between the social classes. She warns Jane to maintain authority over the servants by distancing herself from them and asserts: "one can't converse with them on terms of equality."[179] She instructs Jane on how to remain unseen when in the company of Rochester's guests. She cherishes her role as manager of Thornfield and takes pride in the awareness of her station in the private sphere of Rochester's home.

During her stay at Thornfield, Jane discloses to her readers her disbelief in the traditional conventions of the feminine ideal:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to make puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. [180]

Through Jane's voice, Brontë unleashes her "feminist manifesto." [181] This radical statement undoubtedly erupted emotion and anger in the hearts of women who agreed that women deserved an education and careers that permitted stimulation of the mind, spirit, and body. Jane warns her readers before delivering this passage: "anyone may blame me who likes," which suggests Brontë had inkling that her words might incur a sense of excitement among the public. [182] Prior to unleashing her manifesto, Jane expresses her yearning "for a power of vision which might overpass the limit; which

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[178] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 81.
[179] Ibid., 82.
[180] Ibid., 93.
[181] Rich refers to this statement as Brontë's "feminist manifesto" in "Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman," 475.
[182] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 92.

might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen."[183] Jane desires an independent outlet for her skills, knowledge, and passions so that she can move up in the world based on her own achievements, rather than remain confined to a social class with little or no wealth. Was Brontë referring to the feminist movement occurring at the time? Did she foresee a change in the status of women in the years to come, equal to that of men and free from the restraints forced upon them for thousands of years? It appears that Brontë had begun to open her eyes to a new world of opportunity where women could pursue their talents and dreams, and seek answers to life's mysteries as men had done for centuries. Through Jane's voice and thoughts, Brontë reveals her beliefs of what the future might hold for women.

While Jane symbolizes a woman who pursues her own path in life, Blanche Ingram, Rochester's love interest, demonstrates the course of a woman who follows societal conventions. She seeks marriage for wealth and ascension up the social ladder instead of for love. She does not possess self-worth as Jane does. Jane realizes and affirms that Blanche "cannot truly like [Rochester], or not like him with true affection. If she did, she need not coin her smiles so lavishly, flash her glances so unremittingly, manufacture airs so elaborate, graces so multitudinous."[184] Blanche exemplifies the woman who purposefully objectifies herself in hopes to win a suitable husband. She believes that her only option in life exists in marriage. Unlike Blanche, Jane refuses Rochester's gifts of jewels and costly attire for their wedding, thereby, not becoming an object of desire. She narrates to her readers: "the more he bought me, the more my cheek

[183] Ibid., 93.
[184] Ibid., 159.

burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation."[185] Jane does not define herself by economic status or beauty as Blanche does. Instead, she defines herself by her mental and emotional worth to herself and others. She desires relationships of love over necessity.

At one point in the novel, Jane allows her imagination to overshadow her reason. She begins to fall for Rochester and confesses to her readers: "So happy, so gratified did I become with this new interest added to life, that I ceased to pine after kindred. My thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up…I gathered…strength."[186] She lets her emotions control her thoughts until she learns that Rochester has taken an interest in Blanche. Jane realizes her passion for Rochester must cease and she "bring[s] back with a strict hand such [thoughts and feelings] as had been straying through imagination's boundless and trackless waste, into the safe fold of common sense."[187] Jane recognizes that her imagination leaves her in a vulnerable state of mind. Society frowned upon a woman who let her imagination run freely since it could lead to her failure to function in the domestic sphere. Jane contemplates her thoughts on love and marriage: "It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it…"[188] In an effort to control her emotions and face reality, Jane distinguishes herself from Blanche by drawing two portraits. One displays "a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain," which contrasts the other portrait of Blanche, "an accomplished lady of rank" with

[185] Ibid., 229.
[186] Ibid., 125.
[187] Ibid., 136.
[188] Ibid., 137.

jewels and lavish garments adorning her perfect neck, bust, and arms.[189] In this moment, Jane isolates *herself* from society as she acknowledges the difference in her working-class role as a governess and Blanche's wealthy, upper-class rank. She will not sacrifice "common sense" for an interest in a man who does not love her back. Her willingness to depict herself as she truly is proves to herself and the reader that maintaining her identity supersedes her passion for others.

Later in the novel, Brontë violates the convention that required women never to speak of their affection for men when she permits Jane to express love and passion for Rochester:

> Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are![190]

This passage made some of Brontë's readers uncomfortable, especially Elizabeth Rigby (Lady Eastlake) who criticized the novel in the journal *Quarterly Review.*[191] Rigby attacked the novel and claimed it "an anti-Christian composition." She warned readers that they should not show sympathy towards this strong-minded character, nor desire friends or family that share these traits, and never hire such a woman as a governess.[192] She states that Curer Bell committed "the highest moral offense" by a novelist by

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[189] Ibid., 137.
[190] Ibid., 216.
[191] Elizabeth Rigby, "Review of *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*," in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Brontë,* ed. Gates, 139-142. This article appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in December 1848.
[192] Ibid., 140.

"making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader."[193] Jane displayed characteristics considered very improper for a lady and far from the "angel in the house" mentality of the ideal Victorian woman. Her unwomanly, blunt, and bold conversation with Rochester appeared scandalous to many of Brontë's readers, as Rigby's review suggests.

In return, Rochester reveals his feelings back to Jane, a lowly governess. He informs her of his three mistresses prior to meeting her and how he became Adèle's guardian, the daughter of his first mistress. Rigby argued that the "tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*."[194] Her review demonstrates that some critics deemed the novel improper, especially if written by a lady. Fortunately, Brontë signed the novel Currer Bell, encouraging readers to believe a man had written *Jane Eyre* and perhaps resulting in its early success.

Not only does Rochester pursue his governess as a love interest, but also he does so while still married to Bertha Mason. Bertha, the lunatic wife imprisoned in the attic and kept a secret to nearly everyone at Thornfield, represents the unhappy woman trapped in marriage without escape. Brontë's decision to include two women living under Rochester's roof shocked readers during the nineteenth century; however, Brontë uses the character of Bertha Mason to reveal the social problems of marriage for women with no chance of divorce and no entitlement to capital or property. [195] Not until 1870, when the Married Women's Property Act was enacted, did women gain the right to the property

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[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.
[195] John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 117.

shared by their husbands.[196] Women were forced to submit to their husbands when they became wives, and many women experienced physical and emotional abuse in their marriage. Some women suffered from mental disorders caused by severe isolation from society, and Brontë illustrates this in Bertha's violent actions and beast-like cries.[197] Bertha appears three times in the novel in physical form, and in two instances she brutally attacks men—Rochester and her own brother. Jane refers to Bertha as a "strange wild animal" with "dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane."[198] Bertha's savage attacks may signify the new woman's retaliation against the confinements of the domestic sphere and the inequalities of marriage.

Some critics, such as Gilbert and Gubar, claim that Bertha represents Jane's alter ego and suggest that should Jane choose marriage out of necessity rather than for love, she could potentially end up a creature like Bertha, miserable and incapacitated.[199] Gilbert and Gubar argue that female authors often project their heroines as monsters, which enables the writers to present the divide between remaining an angel in the house and the desire to escape the codes of a patriarchal society.[200] Bertha represents uncontrolled rage and passion. Brontë presents her as a monster, a vampire that yearns for blood from its victims, as in the scene when she violently assaults her brother. Jane refers to Bertha's laughter as "demoniac" and sounding as a "goblin."[201] Jane's deep outrage and frantic rise to escape from the red room parallels Bertha's demonic zeal in her confinement in the attic and during her antics in the house while everyone sleeps. Both

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[196] Millicent Garrett Fawcett in 1883 refers to justice for women and mentions the Married Women's Property Act, enacted in 1870, in *Victorian Women*, eds. Hellerstein et al., 448.
[197] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 53.
[198] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 250.
[199] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 78 and 357.
[200] Ibid., 78.
[201] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 126.

women remain hidden from society, a dirty secret so to speak, and locked away as outcasts. Ironically, when Jane expresses concern about the confinements and limitations imposed on women in her "feminist manifesto," she does so while pacing the third floor where Bertha resides imprisoned away from society. Later in the novel, the discovery of Bertha in the attic encapsulates Jane's argument that the domestic sphere oppresses women. Bertha sets fire to and ruins the home that imprisons her, perhaps Brontë's implication to the need for social change in the feminine role.

Jane's refusal of marriage to Rochester after the discovery of his wife illustrates her determination to maintain her dignity. She chooses reason and principle over emotion by leaving Thornfield, and proves that she would rather maintain her integrity than submit to a man's emotional power over her. She escapes Thornfield and her journey leads her through the moors, a desolate and harsh environment that again suggests her isolation from society. She ends up at Marsh End where she changes her name, has nothing to call her own, and resorts to begging for survival. Here, Jane achieves maturity and selfhood. Her experience away from Rochester teaches her to balance her emotions and independence. Brontë's heroine defies the expectations of Victorian women. She does not submit to men in exchange for marriage. Rochester promises to provide her with economic security if she marries him, but Jane values marriage on equal terms emotionally rather than financially. Jane does not adhere to the conventions of marriage. She will only accept marriage if she can maintain her independence and self-worth.

During her stay at Marsh End, Jane discovers she has a family and they value many of the same things as she does such as an education. Jane finds acceptance, comfort, and love living with them, but also she finds herself facing marriage once again.

Jane rebels against patriarchal codes when she denies marriage to the man that took her in out of the cold and provided her with a home. St. John Rivers demands that Jane marry him. He admits he does not marry her out of love, but rather to pursue the work of the Lord: “A missionary’s wife you must—shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service.”[202] St. John’s order that Jane become his wife out of duty rather than love represents Brontë’s allusion that a wife becomes a slave—a dependent without a life or home of her own with a sole function to obey and please her husband. Brontë suggests that St. John can only find happiness with Jane if he has complete power over her, which displays a common belief of most men during the Victorian period. Jane refuses his proposal because she does not love him. She does not believe that as a missionary’s wife she can fulfill her own needs and desires in life: “I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation... it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted."[203] Jane will not sacrifice her freedom of choice, independence, or self-regard. She replies to St. John’s proposal: “If I were to marry you, you would kill me.”[204] He responds: "Your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue," which signifies Brontë's feelings towards Jane's actions as atypical of a woman in that era.[205] Jane speaks her mind to St. John, which manifests her will to maintain an active voice over a passive one. She defies patriarchy when she declines St. John’s proposal and refuses the work of the Lord.

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[202] Ibid., 343.
[203] Ibid., 339-40.
[204] Ibid., 351.
[205] Ibid.

Eventually Jane leaves Marsh End to return to her true love, Rochester; however, she returns with an inheritance, which elevates her social and economic status equal to his. Jane finally reaches financial independence. Rochester acknowledges Jane's changed financial and social status: "Are you an independent woman? A rich woman?"[206] She informs Rochester that her financial security improves her ability to love him: "I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector."[207] She does not return out of greed or necessity, but because she desires Rochester's love. She can now partake in a relationship with Rochester as his equal partner by both her claim to an inheritance and a solid family name.

In a sense, Jane returns to Rochester as his moral superior and hopes to "rehumanise" him with her newfound knowledge of others: "good people; far better than you: a hundred times better people; possessed of ideas and views you never entertained in your life: quite more refined and exalted."[208] She wishes to spark the life back into Rochester's maimed and melancholy existence. Rochester's physical body has deteriorated from his near-death experience, which alludes to his weakened soul and moral stature. His attempt at adultery with Jane nearly brought about the end of his life, perhaps to reveal Brontë's disapproval of men's unfaithfulness to their wives. Jane's soul searching has led to her self-discovery, and now she can share it with Rochester on the level playing field she desired in the beginning. She shares with her readers the extreme joy her marriage to Rochester brings: "I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest…because I am my husband's life as

[206] Ibid., 370.
[207] Ibid., 379.
[208] Ibid., 373.

fully he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh."[209] In the end, Jane serves "both for his prop and his guide," which indicates both a subservient role and also leadership because of Rochester's dependence on her due to his blindness.[210] Jane enters into a commitment with Rochester that requires give and take. She can now live happily with Rochester as his equal in mind and spirit.

Jane commits herself to freedom of choice, maintains her dignity in the heat of passion as she matures, cherishes her independence, refuses to submit to man's emotional power, and never hesitates to speak her opinions on matters presented to her. Jane Eyre defied the societal norms expected of females during the Victorian era, as did her relationships with men in the novel. Her actions reflect Brontë's belief that women should seek love and ambition, and that they should disregard all the conventions that state otherwise, such as caste and wealth. Brontë's decision to end the novel with Jane and Rochester's marriage reasserts the notion that marriage leads to happiness for women. Although some women desire intellectual growth, they desire love more, according to this novel. It appears Brontë understood the need to provide a happy ending to please her audience and especially women who believed in the patriarchal conventions of the Victorian period. In this manner, both the character and the author maintain their femininity in the public eye.

Last, but not least, Brontë incorporated the use of interior spaces to imply the constraints of women in the domestic sphere. Even women's clothing and surroundings symbolized their confinement, such as tight-laced corsets that constricted the physical

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[209] Ibid., 383-84.
[210] Ibid., 382.

walls of the body and interior walls within the home that separated women from the public sphere. Jane constantly struggles against patriarchal domination throughout the novel by both men and interior spaces. Judith Williams argues that Jane's first home at Gateshead suggests a formidable prison, "a barbaric and primitive fortress with enemies' heads stuck on poles."[211] Aunt Reed locks Jane away in the red room, a symbol of masculinity, from which Jane cannot escape. When she moves into Thornfield, Jane describes the dining room as a large, stately apartment" with "a lofty ceiling," and the drawing room where Rochester entertains his guests decorated with "large mirrors" amid many windows.[212] These rooms define Rochester, a man of importance who requires much space. Jane describes her own chamber as having "small dimensions," which signifies her insignificance in society as an orphan and a governess.[213] Rochester imprisons his wife in the attic unbeknownst to the others who dwell in Thornfield, which suggests the confinement marriage imposed upon women. Women were not only trapped in feminine roles, but also in masculine homes.

Many of the scenes in the novel occur in curtained enclosures, such as parlors and bedrooms, which symbolize the female realm and emphasize a claustrophobic atmosphere. Interestingly, these curtained rooms also symbolize death. Not only did women face oppression within their own homes, but also they faced death figuratively, as in the loss of identity and independence, and literally, as these examples illustrate: the curtained windowsill where Jane attempted to hide from her family until her cousin John discovered and nearly killed her; the red room surrounded by curtains where Mr. Reed

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[211] Judith Williams, *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë* (London: UMI Research Press, 1988), 21.
[212] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 88-89.
[213] Ibid., 83.

died and Jane faints in; the curtain that surrounded the death bed of Helen Burns who dies of consumption; the curtained wall that hides the door to the attic where Bertha tries to murder Rochester and Richard Mason. The emphasis Brontë places on death that some of her female characters suffer in the novel suggests to the reader a negative aspect of the separation between the public and private spheres. In order to save these women, Brontë's novel contends that women must achieve equality and overcome subjection as her title character does in the end.

Jane Eyre presents a tale narrated by a woman who conquered the patriarchal system, climbed the ladder of social class to obtain financial independence, and married her true love. Jane dedicates herself to personal growth and pride in self-worth, which she reveals in her encounters with Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst early in the novel and never gives up on throughout her maturation. Her determination and strong will lead her to Rochester, whom she ends up with as a happily married woman. Jane chronicles the mistreatment she received from the Reed family, Brocklehurst, and Rochester, and how she defied St. John when she refused to accept his marriage proposal. This novel exhibits a reflection of a woman's journey through life from childhood to maturity, self-discovery, and marriage based upon her own emotions and experiences. She conquered the forces that challenged her. As the narrator/author marries happily in the end, both she and Brontë maintain their femininity; however, Brontë clearly depicts that a patriarchal society cannot endure if women begin to live life for themselves, follow their hearts, chase their dreams, pursue their goals, and exercise their faculties.

Chapter Four

EBB's Aurora Leigh: The Woman of Modern Poetry

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, born in 1806, experienced the same literary limitations as Brontë. Unlike Brontë, she came from a wealthy family; however, like Brontë, she received a solid education and support from her father to pursue her love of writing. Both girls' passion for writing led them to create works that challenged the conventions of the patriarchal society during the Victorian period. Barrett Browning felt saddened that women poets had no recognition during her lifetime, and in a letter to Mr. Chorley on this issue she discloses her dismay: "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!"[214] She loved the works written by male poets but discerned a lack of great works by female poets. Barrett Browning wished to progress and develop further than any other female writer before her.[215] She desired acknowledgement as a female poet in a period that regarded poetry as a masculine talent that women, society argued, did not possess. *Aurora Leigh*, completed in 1856, defines a new woman of the Victorian period, a poet who sought to create not just poetry, but a work that could rival any man's. Barrett Browning would seek and accomplish recognition during her lifetime with *Aurora Leigh*. This chapter explores the life of Barrett Browning, her aspiration to

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[214] From EBB "To Mr. Chorley," January 7, 1845, in *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), I, 232.
[215] Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, 122.

create *Aurora Leigh*, the social issues and patriarchal limitations Aurora confronts in her autobiography, and how Barrett Browning managed to preserve her femininity among her readers.

Barrett Browning was the eldest of twelve siblings and the daughter of an heir to a plantation in Jamaica. Her family settled at Hope End in 1809, a large rural estate in Herefordshire. Barrett Browning, an infant prodigy, memorized and recited long verses and composed poetry before she learned to write.[216] Her father supported her writing talent and supplied her with all the necessary tools. She received her education at home where she read Milton's *Paradise Lost,* the works of Shakespeare, Plato, Pope, Byron, and Coleridge, and she taught herself to read Latin and Greek. At the age of twelve, she completed her first book, an epic titled *The Battle of Marathon*, of which her father privately printed fifty copies.[217] In 1826, the twenty-year-old Barrett Browning published her first volume of verse, "An Essay on Mind, with other Poems," which included a didactic poem and shorter pieces written by her before the age of thirteen. Her education flourished at Hope End as did her poetic talents.

Unfortunately, Barrett Browning suffered from an unknown illness at age fourteen from which she never completely recovered. Her father moved the family to London in 1835. The dreary weather intensified her sickness. As an invalid, she was forced to remain indoors and was unable to experience life outside the domestic sphere. Interestingly, Barrett Browning's education enabled her to develop her own opinions of society. She believed women had strength and could confront society's demands and issues. She felt that her writing presented an outlet to express her opinions and, in effect,

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[216] From EBB "To R. H. Horne," October 5, 1843, in *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, I, 3.
[217] Ibid.

could bring about change if her readers agreed with her arguments and concerns. She disagreed with the "angel in the house" mentality of the Victorian period. She argues in her letters and works that this cast of mind disparages women from exercising their talents and skills. In a letter to her future husband, Robert Browning, she explains her reason for writing *Aurora Leigh*:

> My chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel poem…running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly. That is my intention.[218]

She demonstrates in *Aurora Leigh* that women can benefit society just as men do by entering the professional field of writing to expose political, social, and moral conflicts, but in a different point of view—that of the woman's. Barrett Browning utilized her talent as a poet to address social ills and women's rights, and Aurora's transformation from a woman to a poet illustrates the coming together of a female's view on society and the male literary vocation.

Women have a need for personal growth as do men, and Barrett Browning expresses this need in *Aurora Leigh* as the subject/narrator develops her poetic mind by writing an autobiographical verse novel. There occurs a shift from the male view of woman to that of the female poet. *Aurora Leigh* creates art for her own sake and to satisfy a female audience rather than appeal to a male audience. She writes in the fashion of William Wordsworth but projects a woman's perspective and transformation. Aurora aspires to write an epic, then considered a masculine genre, not a ballad or other feminine form of poetry. She presents a woman who pursues a professional career in writing

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[218] From Elizabeth Barrett Browning "To Robert Browning," February 27, 1845, in *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 330.

during the Victorian era that barred women beyond the domestic realm. Rather than accept economic security from a man, she undertakes anything that can sustain her literary career that she earns of her own accord.

Patriarchy imposes the limitations upon Aurora. The separation of the public and private spheres during the Victorian period dictated that Aurora must choose between the masculine world of professionalism and the feminine world of domesticity. She could not have both, and to pursue poetry could potentially compromise her womanhood. Aurora's Aunt Leigh and cousin Romney disparage her for her endeavor to create poetry because poetry does not satisfy the conventional accomplishments of the Victorian woman. She chooses to escape the confinements of women by chasing her passion as a writer rather than settling for love and marriage. She follows her own heart and refuses to heed the advice of others. She chooses a career over marriage. By writing her own story/life account, she prohibits others from constructing her life as they seem fit. Her autobiography depicts the life of the new woman poet during the Victorian period.

Barrett Browning's portrayal of two female protagonists, Aurora Leigh and Marian Erle, illustrates the social conflicts middle- and working-class women suffered during the Victorian period. Aurora Leigh wishes to become a poet and work for a living rather than settle into marriage, while Marian experiences a tragic upbringing and rape that leads society to view her as a "fallen woman." Aurora writes the story of Marian in hopes of revealing to her audience the negative effects silence has on women. Barrett Browning agonized about the women who suffered in the streets of London. In a letter dated February 1857, she expounds on her choice of subjects in *Aurora Leigh*:

> If, therefore, I move certain subjects in this work, it is because my conscience was first moved in me not to ignore them. What has given most offence in the book,

> more than the story of Marian…has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn't to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us—let us be dumb and die.[219]

Barrett Browning was convinced women should speak up about social concerns that affected them. She argues in her letters and poems that it rests in the moral and political duty of society to protect the very people they corrupt with patriarchal conventions. She proclaims her appreciation of Harriet Beecher Stowe for addressing American slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> Her book is quite a sign of the times, and has otherwise and intrinsically considerable power. For myself, I rejoice in the success, both as a woman and as a human being. Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself…[220]

Like Stowe, Barrett Browning opposed child labor, slavery, and prostitution, and she publicized her feelings on these matters in her works. In a letter to W. M. Thackeray, Barrett Browning offers her justification for creating Aurora:

> I don't like coarse subjects, or the coarse treatment of any subject. But I am deeply convinced that the corruption of our society requires not shut doors and windows, but light and air: and that it is exactly because pure and prosperous women choose to *ignore* vice, that miserable women suffer wrong by it everywhere. Has paterfamilias, with his Oriental traditions and veiled female faces, very successfully dealt with a certain class of evil? What if materfamilias, with her quick sure instincts and honest innocent eyes, do more towards their expulsion by simply looking at them and calling them by their names?[221]

Barrett Browning reveals in *Aurora Leigh* how easily wealthy women choose to ignore the mistreatment of their own gender because social conventions suggest they do so.

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[219] From Barrett Browning "To Mrs. Martin," February 1857, Ibid., II, 254.
[220] From Barrett Browning "To Mrs. Jameson," April 12, 1853, Ibid., II, 110-11.
[221] From Barrett Browning "To W. M. Thackeray," April 21, 1861, Ibid., II, 445.

Women condemn what they refuse to speak up about and change. According to Barrett Browning, oppression rests in the hands of both men and women.

Barrett Browning conveys to her readers in the dedication of *Aurora Leigh* that this poem is "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered."[222] She chose to format her verse novel as a combined epic and autobiography, both deemed masculine genres in the nineteenth century and "associated with the Classicists and with Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and Tennyson."[223] Rather than conform to the belief that women should control their emotions when conveying their feelings in poetry, Browning expresses her emotions defiantly throughout *Aurora Leigh*. She does not hesitate to share her opinions of good and evil in the world. According to Rachel Blau Duplessis, "Using the female artist as literary motif dramatizes and heightens the already-present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the ideals of striving, improvement, and visible public works, and the feminine version of that formula: passivity, 'accomplishments,' and invisible private acts."[224] Barrett Browning brought a woman to the "frontline of battle" alongside men. A mirror image of her creator, Aurora represents an active and educated female poet with a personal interest to improve society through her writing. As Aurora matures into a poet and discovers her own self-worth, she manages to conjoin the professional and domestic spheres for her readers.

In the first three stanzas of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora refers to herself as writing in first person. She informs the reader that this book will record the tale of her own life "as

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[222] Dedication to John Kenyon, Esq. in *Aurora Leigh*, 4.
[223] Caro Kaplan, "The Right to Write," in *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 454.
[224] Rachel Blau Duplessis, "To 'bear my mother's name': *Künstlerromane* by Women Writers," *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 463.

when you paint your portrait for a friend."[225] Both Barrett Browning and Aurora inform the reader that this work represents an autobiography in which the narrator will express her thoughts and opinions to the public. Both author and title heroine bring to the reader's attention the need for women poets, not poetry about women. They write to a female audience about the development of a female author for the sake of feminine pleasure, not for the satisfaction of men: "For other's uses, will write now for mine,- / Will write my story for my better self (1.3-4).

In the second stanza, as she describes her only memory of her deceased mother, Aurora introduces the image of the Victorian woman:

> But still I catch my mother at her post
> Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,
> 'Hush, hush – here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes
> Leap forward, taking part against her word
> In the child's riot." (1.15-19)

The description of Aurora's mother embodies the ideal woman who accepts her role as a mother and guards her "post" in the domestic sphere. She speaks what little is necessary—two words to quiet the infant girl. Her mother instructs Aurora in the expectations of the quiet and obedient woman of patriarchy; however, in the following stanza, Aurora informs the reader that her mother died because "She was weak and frail; / She could not bear the joy of giving life, / The mother's rapture slew her" (1.33-35). Aurora believes her mother's feminine weakness resulted in her premature passing. The death of Aurora's mother, the ideal Victorian woman, quells the "angel in the house" image in the novel, perhaps intended by Barrett Browning to reveal her dissatisfaction of the theory that women should remain in the domestic realm as nurturing mothers and

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[225] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 1.5. Citations of the text are to this edition.

obedient wives. Shortly after, when Aurora describes her mother's death portrait, she uses words such as "Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite" (1:154). According to Gilbert and Gubar, these powerful and dreadful descriptions dedicated to women contrast the "angel in the house" image and represent feminine power that patriarchy wants to destroy.[226] Unlike her weak mother, Aurora represents a new woman who exhibits strength and pursues her own dreams, ambitions, and path in life outside of marriage and the role of motherhood.

Barrett Browning imparts to her heroine an education much like the one she received from her own father. Until his death, Aurora's father offers her books to read of Greek and Latin, her first glimpses of the great epics and philosophies of life. At the age of thirteen, she moves in with her aunt who teaches her the proper education for girls: needlework, music, drawing, dancing, French and German, religious devotion, and how to abide by the "angel in the house" mentality. Her aunt refuses to teach her about poetry and limits her reading choices. According to Cora Kaplan, "Patriarchal dominance involved the suppression of women's speech outside the home and a rigorous censorship of what she could read or write."[227] Aurora's aunt follows this notion and allows Aurora to read only books that denigrate women and speak of feminine obedience and submissiveness to men:

> To prove, if women do not think at all…
> ……..
> …books that boldly assert
> Their right of comprehending husband's talk
> When not too deep, and even of answering
> With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is,'—
> Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
> Particular worth and general missionariness,

[226] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 39.
[227] Kaplan, "The Right to Write," 454.

> As long as they keep quiet by the fire
> And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,'
> For that is fatal,—their angelic reach
> Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
> And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,
> Potential faculty in everything
> Of abdicating power in it: she owned
> She liked a woman to be womanly,
> And English women, she thanked God and sighed,
> (Some people always sigh in thanking God)
> Were models to the universe. (1.427-46)

Aunt Leigh symbolizes the ideal English woman in her instructional techniques and morals; yet, she remains unmarried and dependent on no one. She does not wish for Aurora to end up alone. She insists that the "angelic reach" of women rests in their "virtue," not in their mental capabilities, and that marriage exists as the only means of true womanhood.

Aurora will not accept a marriage based on conventions and without love. She wants to exercise her power of reason through writing. Barrett Browning married her husband based on financial, emotional, and literary equality, and she will not allow her heroine to risk self-worth to satisfy the patriarchal system. Barrett Browning indicates her own feminist view in Aurora's rejection of Romney and her refusal to abide by her aunt's conventional method of edification. Like Aurora's aunt, Romney agrees with the patriarchal code of the ideal Victorian woman. He argues that a woman belongs in the home, not out in the public sphere composing poetry of things she has no knowledge:

> 'Women as you are,
> Mere women, personal and passionate,
> You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
> Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
> We get no Christ from you, - and verily
> We shall not get a poet, in my mind.' (2.220-225)

Aurora resists the confinements society imposes upon women, as Barrett Browning did. She refuses to conform to the Victorian period's unjust conventions. Aurora's resistance to her aunt and Romney represents the struggle all women faced who longed to become poets or artists, and thereby challenged the norms of patriarchy. Outside of the private sphere, ambitious women encountered a hostile world.

Barrett Browning alludes to the oppression of women by using clothing images to represent domesticity. On one occasion, as Aurora leaves her house to take a walk, she continues out the door and fails "even to snatch my bonnet by the strings, / But, brushing a green trail across the lawn / With my gown in the dew" (2.20-22). Aurora refuses the constraints of a tied bonnet around her head and replaces the bonnet with a crown of ivy to honor herself as a poet. Romney witnesses her self-crowning and reminds her of her station in life as a woman: "women… / Scarce need to be poets," and to desire fame "Brings headaches…and defiles / The clean white morning dresses" (2.93-96). The defiled dresses he refers to symbolize the risks she takes of defiling her feminine image by stepping into the public sphere. The resistant heroine refuses to become the "angel in the house" and counters his argument:

> I would rather take my part
> With God's Dead, who can afford to walk in white
> Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here
> And gather up my feet from even a step
> For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.
> I choose to walk at all risks. (2.101-06)

Aurora will only accept the role of "angel" in death to walk with God. She will not accept the expectations required of women to remain quiet and submissive to men. She will pursue her goal to become a writer even if it causes her to "soil" her womanhood. She makes her resistance to the constraints of domesticity clear to her readers as she

acknowledges herself as a poet in the professional sphere by placing the wreath of ivy upon her head instead of the bonnet worn by "angels."

Just as clothing might restrict women, so too can the small interior rooms where they spend much of their time. Aurora describes the "little chamber" she dwells in at her aunt's house:

> The walls
> Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight
> Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds
> Hung green about the window which let in
> The out-door world with all its greenery.
> You could not push your head out and escape. (1.567, 570-75)

She sleeps on a small bed enveloped by curtains that constrict even less space, and the protective curtains support that even in sleep women experience limits imposed upon them. Aurora dreams of a life free from the conventions of patriarchy. The color of nature surrounds Aurora in her chamber, but only as fabrics to remind her of a woman's place in the domestic sphere. Real nature, the subject of poetry, exists outside her aunt's home and supervision.

The issue of marriage arises frequently in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora refuses Romney's proposal once and Marian refuses him twice. Barrett Browning's choice to portray two women who reject marriage suggests her resistance to the conventional standards of the Victorian period. After Aurora refuses Romney's offer, she articulates to the reader: "If I had married [Romney], / I should not dare to call my soul my own / Which so he had bought and paid for" (2.785-87). She will not permit a man to purchase her as he might a slave. She requires the freedom to write at will and on whatever topic she feels inspired to record. She has passions that Romney cannot satisfy. He wants her to assist him in his mission to end separation of class distinctions. The familiar cry of Jane

Eyre when she refuses to marry St. John Rivers echoes in Aurora's response to Romney as she rejects his proposal: "'A wife to help your ends—in her no end!'" (2.403). Both St. John and Romney devote themselves to great causes, but Brontë and Barrett Browning imply the importance of a marriage in which both husband and wife may coexist as equals.

Following the death of her aunt, Aurora escapes to London to pursue a career in writing. The limited fortune that she inherits from her aunt leaves in her a tough predicament. She must balance her dream to write poetry with her need to earn a living by writing prose. She discloses her early writing experience in London:

> There came some vulgar needs:
> I had to live that therefore I might work,
> And, being but poor, I was constrained, for life,
> To work with one hand for the booksellers
> While working with the other for myself
> And art: you swim with feet as well as hands,
> Or make small way. I apprehended this,—
> In England no one lives by verse that lives;
> And apprehending, I resolved by prose
> To make a space to sphere my living verse.
> I wrote for encyclopaedieas, magazines,
> And weekly papers, holding up my name
> To keep it from the mud. (3.300-12)

Barrett Browning suggests that Aurora practically prostitutes herself to make ends meet by providing writing material to businesses while also satisfying her own personal needs as a writer. Aurora realizes that she must maintain her reputation not only as a woman seeking a profession over marriage, but also as a female writer seeking fame in the literary world. By upholding her reputable name, she finds more work in the literary market, which enables her to make more profitable earnings. Rather than accept the

economic security provided by Romney, she excels in her profession and gains literary autonomy and financial independence.

Aurora's move to London marks the point in her journey where she transforms from a young girl who obeys patriarchal commands to a woman who creates her own messages in poetry. She defends the notion that poetry should inform the public of present-day life and its people:

> Nay, if there's room for poets in this world
> A little overgrown, (I think there is)
> Their sole work is to represent the age,
> Their age, not Charlemagne's—this live, throbbing age,
> That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
> And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
> Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
> Than Roland with his knights of Roncesvalles. (5.200-07)

Here, Barrett Browning and Aurora deliver their poetic manifesto. Unlike the poets who preceded them, the author/narrator will revolutionize epic poetry by presenting a female contemporary view of events. Aurora achieves this task in *Aurora Leigh* by associating the social issue of the "fallen woman" during the nineteenth century in Europe with a single woman, Marian, who experiences the prejudices placed upon a "fallen woman" firsthand. Aurora reveals to her readers the scandal of an aristocrat woman, Lady Waldemar, who is involved in the rape and exploitation of Marian, a poor working-class girl. Aurora wishes to display the effects of society's ignorance on the lives of unfortunate women who suffer in the streets by the hands of those who should protect them.

Lady Waldemar's scheme results in the defamation of character of an innocent woman. Marian refuses to remain silent about her rape, considered a taboo subject during

the Victorian period. Marian's voice becomes her strength and resistance against violence:

> 'True
> We wretches cannot tell out all our wrong
> Without offence to decent happy folk.
> I know that we must scrupulously hint
> With half-words, delicate reserves, the thing
> Which no one scrupled we should feel in full.
> Let pass the rest, then; only leave my oath
> Upon this sleeping child, -man's violence,
> Not man's seduction, made me what I am,
> As lost as . . I told *him* I should be lost.
> When mother's fail us, can we help ourselves? (6.1219-29)

Marian reveals to Aurora the cruelty and indifference society, or "mothers," can impose upon another human being on account of prejudices, jealousy, and hatred. "Decent" people would rather disregard the awful events that occur outside the safety of their homes; however, Marian's story, recorded by Aurora, will no longer fall upon deaf ears. Everyone who reads *Aurora Leigh* will come face to face with the reality of evil that exists in the world.

Marian represents the oppression of all women. She experiences tyranny from her own family, men, and upper-class women. Aurora insists on writing Marian's story. She wants to present Marian to the world as a good and loving mother who succeeded in a world that attempted to imprison her in its patriarchal system. Society shunned Marian as a prostitute because of her illegitimate son. Aurora wishes to honor Marian for her honesty, hard work, and dedication as a single mother. Her compassion for Marian in the verse novel provides a model for others who will read this work. She wants to use her skills as a poet to bring attention to social wrongs and promote change. As Aurora narrates the story of Marian, she begins to discover her true self. Aurora set out to "write

my story for my better self" (1.4), but she ends up writing a story about both her and Marian's self-discovery.

As Aurora becomes more involved with Marian, her feminine image as a provider and nurturer begins to overshadow her masculine image as a writer. Aurora fulfills the duty of a Victorian woman by becoming a caretaker of Marian and her son. Aurora finds in herself a true woman during her journey. She becomes a social poet when she establishes a relationship with Marian and helps her improve her confidence and life. Aurora does not accept this domestic passively. Instead, she embraces it actively by helping to shape Marina's character. Aurora believes chivalry no longer exists, but has been replaced by women's compassion:

> To see a wrong or suffering moves us all
> To undo it though we should undo ourselves;
> Ay, all the more, that we undo ourselves,-
> That's womanly, past doubt, and not ill-moved…
> ……
> We're all so, - made so – 'tis our woman's trade
> To suffer torment for another's ease.
> The world's male chivalry has perished out,
> But women are knights-errant to the last. (7.215-25)

According to Aurora, women take on the masculine role of protector, although this role becomes feminized by the emphasis placed on love and compassion rather than physical acts of brave deeds. Women become self-sacrificing heroines who save others from the evils of society with their superior ability over men to love.

Not only does Aurora seek to write in a male-dominated profession and masculine genre, but she also violates patriarchal conventions by taking in a "fallen woman" off the streets to care for her and her illegitimate son. These women live together under one roof without the aid of a man to provide income. They represent self-sustaining women in the

domestic sphere living in a matriarchal system. Aurora violates the "angel in the house" image in her verse novel by voicing her opinions on and providing possible solutions to social conflicts, such as the one experienced by Marian. The ideal Victorian woman never spoke about issues other than domestic ones. Barrett Browning provides the reader with a new woman who serves both as a public analyst by bringing attention to social issues in *Aurora Leigh* and as a woman who cares about her fellow "sister" and extends open arms to comfort and support.

Early in the novel, Marian willingly gives up her independence for marriage with the sole purpose of pleasing her husband. She represents the exemplary Victorian woman who assumes a passive role of wife. Romney objectifies her by using her in his scheme to rid society of class distinction: "'Twixt class and class, opposing rich to poor, / Shall we keep parted? Not so…. / …joining in a protest 'gainst the wrong / On both sides. / …fellow-worker, be my wife?'" (4.125, 130-31, 150). But Marian never marries Romney after his first proposal. She acknowledges later in the novel to Aurora that she did not truly love Romney. She reminisces: "'What was in my thought? / To be your slave, your help, your toy, your tool. / To be your love… / Did I love, / Or did I worship?'" (9.369-71, 378-79). She nearly followed in the footsteps of most women by marrying for necessity and convention's sake rather than for love. Marian realizes that her son desires her undivided attention and devotion, which leaves no room for anyone else in her heart. She takes pride in motherhood even if her willingness to remain unmarried defies patriarchal standards. She accepts her role as a mother, rejects the intimidating prejudices of society, and maintains her feminine image in Aurora's eyes.

Society viewed women who used their own judgments, exhibited their own passions, and sought out their own self-worth as unfit mothers and wives; however, Marian proves her self-worth through the rearing of her son without the aid of a husband or father. She exercises her judgment to refuse marriage because she does not want to jeopardize her relationship with her son. Aurora also exercises judgment, exhibits passions, seeks self-worth both in life and in her poetry, and transgresses the boundaries imposed on women by pursuing a career and refusing marriage; yet, she maintains her femininity throughout the novel. Aurora preserves her integrity because she uses her writing to improve the life of an innocent woman whom society turned on in ignorance. Barrett Browning deplored the exploitation of women: "There are worse plagues, deeper griefs, dreader wounds than the physical. What of the forty thousand wretched women in this city? The silent writhing of them is to me more appalling than the roar of cannons." The subject matter of *Aurora Leigh* confirms her displeasure with the treatment of society's own people.[228] After listening to Marian's story, Aurora becomes aware of Marian's virtue and the goodness in many of the women who roam the streets of London and Paris. She writes her story for others to read so they also can see the purity in Marian and bestow on her the respect a virtuous and noble woman deserves:

> 'It takes a soul,
> To move a body: It takes a high-souled man,
> To move the masses, even to a cleaner stye:
> It takes the ideal, to blow a hair's-breadth off
> The dust of the actual.—Ah, your Fouriers failed,
> Because not poets enough to understand
> That life develops from within…..' (2.479-85)

[228] From Barrett Browning "To Mrs. Martin," October, 1855, in *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* II, 213;

She understands that her poetry can bring about change once she discovers the truth of life.

Aurora accepts a life of poverty over marriage to her cousin, takes a job in London writing for magazines and newspapers, and finds fame and admiration once she publishes her own works. Eventually she realizes that her rejection of Romney's marriage proposal has left her alone. Fame cannot replace the need for love. Women writers desire the approval of male readers just as Aurora desires the approval of Romney. While Aurora experiences loneliness as a female writer, she acknowledges the love showered on male writers from their wives, mothers, and daughters. Eventually Aurora comes to realize that "Art is much, but love is more" (9.656). Just as her father once told her in his dying breath, "'Love, my child, love, love!'" (1.212), she accedes to his last words. She finally understands that to write great poetry she must experience a spiritual union with another. Whereas she once believed that she could not become a great writer if she became a wife, she now realizes that as a wife she will better connect with her emotions and can infuse her poetry with these feelings. Aurora resolves to enter into a traditional marriage typical of domestic fiction, but only if Romney agrees with her that women must not remain silent and submissive. Aurora accepts Romney's proposal and concedes to the conventions of marriage.

Once again, a situation occurs in *Aurora Leigh* that resembles a scene in *Jane Eyre*. Romney is blinded by a rebellious act, which stems from disagreement over his political theories and results in a fire that burns his house to the ground. This episode in *Aurora Leigh* parallels the ruin of Thornfield by the oppressed Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. While Romney loses his abode where he rallied against the oppression imposed by

society, Rochester lost his home where he secretly imprisoned his wife within her own home. Both Romney and Rochester become blind, but the fact that Rochester also lost a hand, the hand that dared to commit adultery by seeking another's hand in marriage, demonstrates Brontë's greater contempt for her character. Barrett Browning does not disfigure Romney as Brontë does Rochester. Barrett Browning ensures in a letter to Anna Jameson that Romney's injuries did not serve as punishment:

> The only injury received by Romney in the fire was from a blow and from the emotion produced by the *circumstances* of the fire. Not only did he *not* lose his eyes in the fire, but he describes the ruin of his house as no blind man could. He was standing there, a spectator. Afterwards he had a fever, and the eyes, the visual nerve, perished, showing no external stain…[229]

Perhaps Barrett Browning blinded Romney to symbolize the blindness of society that fails to recognize the oppression of women. Jill Rappaport refers to the injuries of Romney and Rochester as "the heroes' humbling through symbolic castration."[230] She argues that "these dramatic conclusions, with their self-sufficient women and self-doubting men, have suggested to many critics the difficulties that Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning faced when trying to imagine female independence within marriage."[231] Both Rochester and Romney become passive, dependent, and inferior to the women they love. By this reversal, Jane and Aurora become both provider and wife, and they assume both male and female roles.

Aurora understands the power women have in society, if only they can exert it without sacrificing their image. Women view life differently than men, and if women can fulfill their potentials, express their opinions, and offer solutions without chastisement,

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[229] From Barrett Browning "To Anna Jameson," December 26, 1856, in *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* II, 246.
[230] Jill Rappaport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63.
[231] Ibid.

perhaps society could improve. Aurora sets the example by pursuing her career as a poet interested in contemporary social issues. She hopes to bring attention to the negative actions of society and effect social change. Barrett Browning once stated in a letter to her sister-in-law: "I am not blind as Romney…He had to be blinded, observe, to be made to see; just as Marian had to be dragged through the uttermost debasement of circumstances to arrive at the sentiment of personal dignity."[232] Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* suggests that if women begin to disregard the image shaped by patriarchy and instead regard their own self-worth and how to improve the lives of others, a cultural revolution is not far off.

During the writing of *Aurora Leigh*, debates existed over married women's rights to receive copyrights. Married women who pursued writing careers and succeeded in publication did not receive their earnings. Their husbands gained control of labor wages, since "under the legal condition of coverture, the husband, not the wife, owned her body, and therefore any physical or intellectual fruit of it."[233] Women had no rights to their labor because they had no rights to a "civil existence after marrying."[234] Barrett Browning participated in the debates over copyrights and pushed for the Married Women's Property Movement to seek half the share of earnings and property of their own and that of their husbands.[235] It makes sense that Barrett Browning chose to depict a heroine who avoided marriage so that she could govern her own earnings obtained from her profession as a writer. Aurora wished to maintain economic independence as a female

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[232] From Barrett Browning "To Sarianna Browning," November, 1856, in *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* II, 242.
[233] Cheri Larsen Hoeckley, "Anomalous Ownership: Copyright, Coverture, and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer 1998), 142.
[234] Ibid., 143.
[235] Ibid., 138.

writer in the professional arena by her own hand and hard work, as Barrett Browning managed to do in real life. Barrett Browning demonstrated to the public through *Aurora Leigh* that ambitious women might refuse marriage to pursue their own dreams if copyright laws did not change. Both Barrett Browning and her heroine transcended the boundaries of married women during the Victorian period by pursuing professions, achieving fame as writers, and gaining the rights to their earned income in accordance with her husbands' wishes.

Barrett Browning portrays Aurora as the subject in *Aurora Leigh*. She reversed the tradition of the masculine epic by depicting a woman as the heroine at the center of the action rather than the object of desire. Her heroine revealed the feminine consciousness to the readers. Rather than exhibit physical strength, Aurora exhibits an inner strength of character. Aurora searches for her own identity and happiness in a male-dominated world. She yearns for autonomy. She withstands attacks on her poetry as insignificant and effeminate, without any reason or impact on society. Romney offers Aurora a loveless marriage as a means to achieve importance in her life by benefiting his career. Aurora defends her equal right to pursue her own career outside of marriage as she refuses Romney's first proposal to her:

> 'You misconceive the question like a man,
> Who sees a woman as the complement
> Of his sex merely. You forget too much
> That every creature, female as the male,
> Stands single in responsible act and thought
> As also in birth and death…
> ……
> I, too, have my vocation,—work to do.'(2.434-55)

Barrett Browning, through the voice of Aurora, provides a public declaration that all women deserve the same chance as men to pursue a life other than marriage. Many

women have dreams other than as mothers. Some women desire the chance to increase their knowledge of the world beyond the domestic sphere. Knowledge of the world requires experience in the public realm rather than imprisoned within the interior dwelling of a husband's home. *Aurora Leigh* illustrates the woman/poet as the subject capable of making her own choices and living an independent life.

Sueann Schatz argues that Barrett Browning's epic, which focuses on contemporary issues of the nineteenth century but reads like a woman's diary, led to the origination of a new genre devoted to women—the verse novel.[236] She adds that "this new genre, specifically designed to address contemporary social problems and offer a woman's solutions to them, marks Barrett Browning's poem as the most prominent, if not the first, example of nineteenth-century domestic-profession factionalism."[237] Barrett Browning merges the professional and domestic sphere into one, setting the tone for female authors to come. A contemporary critic of Barrett Browning once said: "Who would silence any struggle made by those who fancy themselves desolate, oppressed, undervalued,—to unlock the prison-doors,—to melt the heat of injustice? Mrs. Browning is never unwomanly in her passionate pleadings for women…"[238] Thanks to Barrett Browning's insistent portrayal of women's oppression in her writings, women would eventually break free from their cages and fly to freedom, singing songs of equality.

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[236] Sueann Schatz, *Aurora Leigh* as Domestic-Professional Fiction," in *Philological Quarterly 79*, No. 1 (winter 2000), 110. 91-117.
[237] Ibid.
[238] H. F. Chorley, from *The Athenaeum*, November 22, 1856, in *Aurora Leigh*, 403.

Conclusion

Courageously, Vigée-Lebrun, Cassatt, Brontë, and Barrett Browning challenged the limitations of their sex by engaging in professions outside of the domestic sphere as female artists and authors. Both Vigée-Lebrun and Barrett Browning balanced careers and motherhood, which proved that women could succeed at both. Cassatt and Brontë chose lives of close family and friends rather than marrying, which demonstrated that women could sustain a living without the aid of a husband. All four women managed to provide enough income to care for their families at young ages, and they later provided livings for themselves from commissions and the sales of their works. These exceptional female artists and authors changed the role of the woman on canvas and in texts from an object to the subject, and they created images for the female gaze and reader rather than the male. Vigée-Lebrun, Cassatt, Brontë, and Barrett Browning revealed to the public that women were more than daughters, mothers and wives; they also had skills and talents that deserved a chance in the professional arena. They persevered against the limits imposed upon them, but they maintained the ideal female image in both life outside of their profession and in their oeuvres, which led to their acceptance in a male-dominated world. Their decisions to chase dreams and pursue talents outside of the domestic sphere undoubtedly paved the way for future women artists, authors, and feminists.

Vigée-Lebrun balanced the role of motherhood with her artistic career, although many believed that a woman had to choose one or the other. Cassatt remained unmarried

but joined a revolutionary group of artists that initiated techniques and styles unaccepted by the academic system at the time. Cassatt still clung to cultural ideals of femininity by focusing on mother-daughter relationships in her oeuvre of paintings. Both artists exhibited feminine charms and social graces that enhanced their reputations among their clientele, and hence, their careers. They were also acknowledged for their beauty and fashion, which greatly benefited their social relations. Both Cassatt and Vigée-Lebrun paid special attention in their art representations to the depiction of expected roles of women in a male-dominated society. They represented female sitters as seen through the eyes of a woman, whether dressed in fashionable costumes or modern dress, embraced in the arms of loved ones, or engaged in activities that defined the world of women. Since it was men who mostly painted women until the eighteenth century, many depictions of women represented objects for the male gaze; however, female artists began to represent the female sitter as the subject of the painting, exhibiting cultural ideals of femininity as loving mothers and intelligent. Vigée-Lebrun and Cassatt inspired new images of women and innovated traditional portrayals of mother and daughter from the works of the masters.

Both Brontë and Barrett Browning's title characters deviate from English domesticity and pursue careers. Aurora acts according to her own will rather than submit to a man's, much like Jane Eyre. Aurora and Jane, both orphans, receive a feminine education of conventional accomplishments from their aunts that instruct them to remain submissive and obedient to the wishes of men. These two heroines resist the idea that women must accept inferior stations. They both reject two marriage proposals by men who refuse to accept and appreciate their individuality and intellect. They only agree to

settle into marriages that grant them personal, financial, and emotional autonomy. Aurora Leigh and Jane Eyre represent strong-minded female characters and suggest that the feminine ideal was changing during the nineteenth century. Aurora's achievement as a writer and a woman illustrates that a strong-minded woman can maintain the feminine ideal in a patriarchal society. She emphasizes the ability of poetry as a way for self-discovery in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora evolves as a woman and a poet from the object of her suitor's gaze to the subject of her own journey through life mentally and emotionally. Aurora's transformation resembles that of Jane Eyre, who becomes the maker of her own destiny as she transforms from a governess to an independent woman in her pilgrimage from youth to adulthood. Aurora and Jane's self-worth stands above all else. These characters define the new woman that Brontë and Barrett Browning both looked forward to as the representative of women in the near future. Both authors believed in a reconstructed society that included women in the public sphere. Only then could the future hope to improve.

To conclude, women artists and authors achieved recognition during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by hurdling obstacles to portray their goals. They transgressed the boundaries of female accepted careers during their lives and in their works. Vigée-Lebrun, Cassatt, Brontë, and Barrett Browning had talent, ambition, and charisma, which enhanced their professions in a patriarchal society that condemned women for pursuing roles outside of motherhood. They proved that women also possessed creativity and that a lack of educational resources could not keep them from becoming experts in their own right. They borrowed from male representations and created styles all their own, such as new mother and child depictions in art or expressions

of a woman's self-discovery in autobiographical texts. Vigée-Lebrun focused on motherhood, while Cassatt focused on childhood; however, both illustrated the importance of embracing those we love. For this reason both artists maintained their femininity in the eyes of their societies. Brontë addressed a strong female character's feelings of oppression and her journey to maturation in the form of an autobiography, while Barrett Browning addressed the pursuit of a woman's poetic mind by writing an autobiographical verse novel; yet, both authors resolved all conflicts faced by their characters with the acceptance of marriage. In doing so, Brontë and Barrett Browning preserved their works as idealistic portrayals of women in quest of self-discovery.

Brontë and Barrett Browning's new genres highlighted the female experience told from a feminine point of view, as did the new styles of Vigée-Lebrun and Cassatt's depictions of "Mother and Child" images. Both Brontë and Barrett Browning "managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards."[239] All four women expressed their creative minds to the public eye and challenged the patriarchal theory that women could not and should not pursue creative ambitions. Their works, both visual and literary, sought out awareness and solicited a reexamination of women's values, roles, and duties in Victorian society.

[239] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic,* 73.

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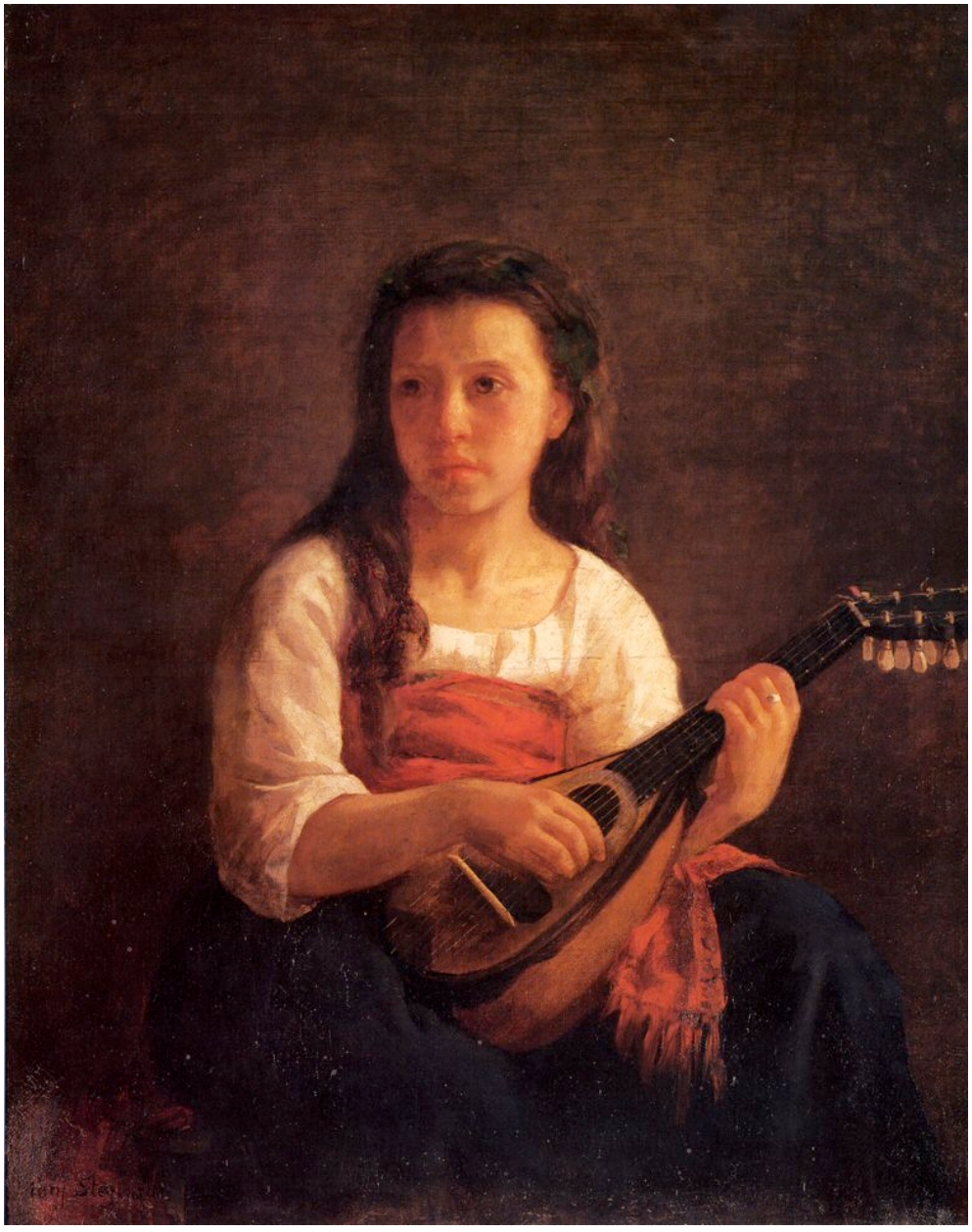

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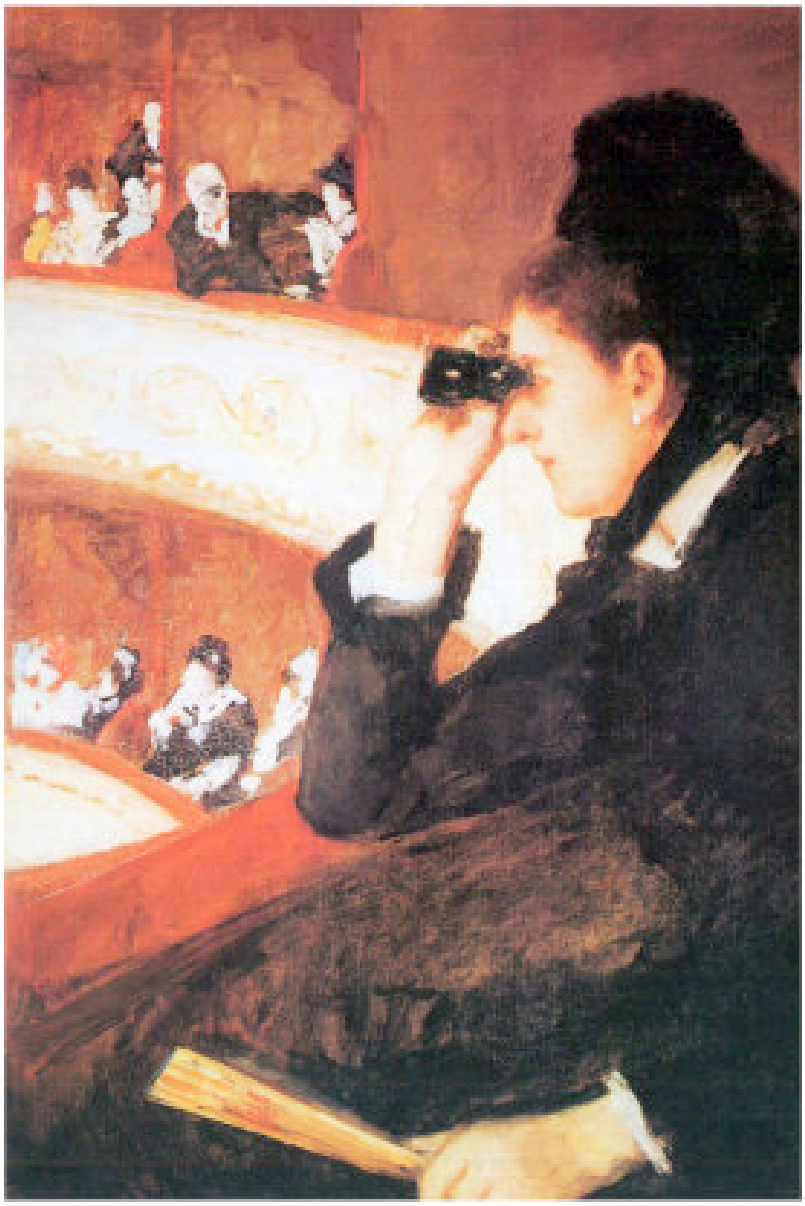

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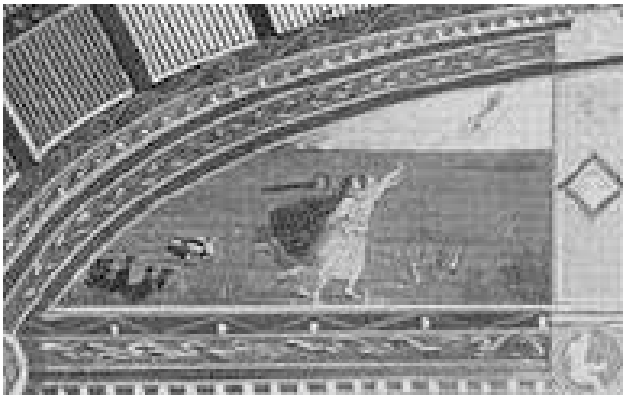

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